

***The Rise of the Documentary Film Movement in Thai Cinema
During the Current Political Conflict***

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Abstract

Throughout the history of Thai cinema, documentaries have only recently become popular with Thai film-goers and young filmmakers. With the establishing of Doc Club, a documentary distributor, youngsters have become more exposed to documentary films. The success of a new generation of documentary filmmakers in international film festivals have inspired newcomers to try their hands at documentary filmmaking. Moreover, a new political consciousness, fueling the new generation during recent political protests, made them look for chances to speak on social problems. Documentary films have become a space for filmmaker to voice their concerns while trying to reach out for international audiences. This paper attempts to capture this moment in time where several documentary films, including, *School Town King* (Laisuwanchai, 2021), *The Cave Lived* (2020), *Come and See* (Boonprakob, 2019), and others have made it onto cinema screens and even being recognised with national awards. This paper will take a closer look at what lies beneath these films, contextualized by the rising of Pro-democracy movement since 2019 when the country had its first generation election since the 2014 coups d'état by General Prayut Chan-o-cha who was re-installed as elected Prime Minister. The demand for radical change in society by the new generation has kept its momentum up to the present day; these afore-mentioned films could give an insight into their mentality while attempting to destabilize the establishment's traditional values in varying ways.

Keywords: Thai Documentary Film, Thailand Political Conflict, Political Communication, Film and Politics

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Introduction

Throughout the history of Thai cinema, political situations have propelled a crop of filmmakers to look through social lenses and make their voices heard. The recent political conflict was sparked by the coup d'état in 2014 led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta who would continue as Prime Minister in the 2019 controversial general election. Another important incident was when the new monarchy, Maha Vajiralongkorn, son of revered former King Bhumibol Adulyadej who died in 2016 after reigning for 70 years, ascended to the throne. Under several years of military rule and economic melt down, the young generation feel like they have power in their hands with many becoming first time voters, their hopes up for the general election in 2019.

Reality hit hard when General Prayuth returned as Prime Minister; the last straw was when the new pro-democracy Future Forward Party were forced to disband in 2020. It was then that the pro-democracy protest has been gathering pace. The majority of protesters changed from the previous protests which started between the second half of 2000s and continued until the 2014 coup d'état. The current protesters are comprised mainly of those in their 20-30s, as well as the younger generation still in their school uniform, compared to previous protests which had an older demographic. Beside calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth, they demanded amendments to the constitution which will give fair elections and curb the king's power. The latter provoked a wide discussion in the country, as it has never been publicly discussed before during former King Bhumibol's reign.

In this paper, I will focus on films made after the general election in 2019 which captured the recent moment of the pro-democracy movement through the documentary genre. The films included will be *Come and See* (Boonprakob, 2019), *School Town King* (Laisuwanchai, 2020), and *The Caved Life* (2020). These films are considered independent films with the filmmakers having less constraints and more freedom to address their subject as they want. They give insight into people's current mentality and also the film's own attempt at destabilising the establishment and its traditional values in certain ways. I will look into how these films provide an oppositional or alternative framing of contemporary socio-political problems. Moreover, I argue that these films become a space for the unspeakable for subjects whom have been long suppressed. I will also look at how documentary films are used as political communication among the masses in order to subvert narratives meanings imposed by authority.

I am aided by how the relationship between film and politics can be seen as political communication. Films have their own system of communication, allowing us to read semiotically into how they communicate to supposedly large and diverse audiences (Combes, 2014). The potential of films have been realised throughout history through both explicit propaganda films or mainstream cinema, from Soviet films of the 1920s to contemporary Hollywood films. In terms of political communication, scholars may have an interest in films with political subjects whether explicitly or implicitly. According to James E. Combes (2014), it is also the case that non-political films can be 'legitimately interpreted for what they tell us about the politics of a particular era' (p. 21). He further suggests that political communication may become part of an internal sign system of movies without the filmmakers realising it. In the same way, Cornolli and Narboni (1971) go so far as to suggest that every film is political (p.30). Also, Jacques Rancière (2010) argues that "art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common

experience of the sensible” (p. 148). By following the line of political communication and Rancière’s notion of ‘dissensus’ and ‘consensus’, what follows will not only demonstrate how these films are used as political communication, but also how they disrupt and potentially reconfigure the politics. In the following, I will take a closer look at each of these films in focus. Firstly, I would like to illustrate the relationship between documentary films and politics in the context of Thai cinema.

A Brief History of Thai Documentary Films and Relationship with Politics

“We don’t have documentary films,” Chalida Uabumrungjit (n.d.) quoted Dome Sukvong, a founder of the National Film Archive. It is a startling truth in the early 2000s for Thai Cinema, a genre comparatively well developed in Southeast Asia as a whole. Documentary films are not the first that comes to mind when a filmmaker chooses a medium to convey his/her idea or artistic vision. Not until recently has it become popular among filmmakers. As a filmmaker and film scholar myself, I have a direct brush with documentary films, having made a couple myself in the past few years and seeing many young filmmakers launch their careers as documentary filmmakers. Although the film scene has not always been this lively.

Looking back at the history of Thai documentary films, they have not been entirely non-existent, considering that it was long used by Royalty to record their daily lives in the early days of 1887. It was also used by the state to disperse information to the public since the 1920s, such as those made by the Royal State Railway’s own film unit, the Topical Film Service, which continued on for many decades (Uabumrungjit, n.d.). The unit acted as the centre for national filmmaking and the train was a means to distribute films to different parts of the country. They were also responsible for making the first travel documentary programme to be aired when Thailand became televised in 1955. Another prominent documentary film tradition can be found during the Cold War. During this period, the United States Information Services (USIS) were active in producing both narrative and documentary films that would promote anti-communist messaging around the country. Despite the USIS being discontinued in the late 1990s, they still produced many films in the past decades before they were discontinued. Unfortunately, most of these films were lost except for the few excerpts preserved by the Thai Film Archive including *Bangkok, Our Capital* (1957), portraying Bangkok as a civilised city representing the free world (Uabumrungjit, n.d.). As we can see, films here have been used as political communication, with both the Royal State Railway and the USIS being early examples in Thailand’s case.

As a country sprinkled with coups d’état since the 1932 revolution, transitioning Thailand from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional system, the first brief moment of freedom was between 1973-1976. This was when the student demonstration movement gained momentum and forced the military leader at the time, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, into exile before a new coup d’état in 1977 took place. During this time, according to Anchalee Chaiworaporn (2002), the youth counter culture blossomed, giving birth to ‘social-criticism’ film and so-called new wave cinema (p. 142). The new generation were awakened to political consciousness and this overrode every aspect of their lives. Among them, *Tongpan* (1975) and *The struggle of Hara Factory Workers* (1975, Jon Ungpakorn), accused of being leftist films, were considered early Thai documentary films which addressed the injustices faced by both rural and urban poor that implicated with political message. This freedom was short-lived; documentary films did not continue to flourish.



Figure 1: The Struggle of Hara Factory Workers (1975)

In the 1980s and 1990s it was mainstream genre films, especially teenage, action and horror films, that dominated the scene. With the coup d'état in 1991 that brought about another political bloodshed, came with it another generation of filmmakers fuelled by the rise of early digital technology, the cheaper 8 mm. and 16 mm. used by these independent creatives filmmakers. *Bat in May* (1992) was made by Hamer Salwala, an early independent filmmaker, which was an impressive record of the May demonstration.

Since 2005, the political conflict was at its height resulting in mass protest from two divided groups, one being anti- and the other being pro-Thaksin Shinawatra, a populist prime minister among the rural poor, alongside his sister, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014). The protests ended up with coups d'état in 2006 and 2014 which ousted both Thaksin and Yingluck, both escaping to live in exile. During this time, a number of interesting documentary films were been made, including, *Sua Ronghai* (*Crying Tigers*, Santi Taepanich, 2005), featuring four Northeastern people in Bangkok, that was also the first documentary film to be screened on a commercial cinema. This was followed by *Innocence* (Areeya Chumsai and Nisa Kongsri, 2005) and *Final Score* (Sorraya Nakasuwan, 2007), the latter of which was produced originated from a commercial film studio. Documentary films have become more familiar for mainstream audiences.

After 2005, more direct political documentary films can be seen in *The Truth Be Told: The Cases against Supinya Klangnarong* (2007, Pimpaka Towira), about a media activist who was sued for libel by Shin Corp, owned by Thaksin's family and *Citizen Juling* (2008, Ing K and Manich Sriwanichpoom), about the conflict in the Muslim-dominated deep-south region. The two films have brought political issues into the foreground for feature length documentaries, especially the latter one with images of the coup in it. Since then many documentary films have been made which launched the careers of a few successful documentary filmmakers, careers which would not have been possible before, including Urapong Raksasad (*Stories from the North* [2005], *Agrarian Utopia* [2009], *Song of Rice* [2014]), Nontawat Nambenchapol ([*Boundary*, 2014], *By the River* [2013]).

Films during Pro-Democracy Movement

During this period, documentary films have become increasingly popular among young filmmakers. Although there are other factors which explain why documentary films have become more popular in recent years, beside the changing political climate. The first factor is the establishment of *Documentary Club* or *Doc Club*, by Thida Palitpolkanpim, former

editor of the cinephile magazine, *Bioscope*. *Doc Club* started as documentary distributor and expanded its role into screening documentary programs at their own cinema space. Secondly, the success of Thai documentary filmmakers in both national and international venues have kept documentary films in the interest of younger filmmakers. Moreover, the expanding popularity of streaming platforms gave documentary filmmakers the hope that their films will have a chance to be distributed beyond the limited screening in Bangkok. We have seen more people with cameras in the recent protests that carefully frame their records of events than in any other previous time.

Come and See (known in Thai as *Ehipassiko*) is a film about Dhammakaya, a controversial Buddhist temple, where its Abbot, Dhammajayo, was charged with money-laundering and receiving stolen property. The subject of corruption within the temples is not new to Thai society, but in this case it has become front page news and talk of the town. It is of course no longer a simple corruption case in light of the recent 2014 coup d'état. Though at first glance, the film is about a controversial Buddhist sect, but gradually focuses on the head-to-head clash between faith and politics. Dhammakaya's teachings have always been in question for many years as it represents a sub-denomination of Theravada Buddhism which is at times referred to as cult. In a way, Dhammakaya gives us a picture of reality where capitalism consumes the religious aspect of life, where donation influences the condition of one's afterlife. Their empire has grown larger and larger from the donations of millions of followers, resulting in forceful marketing strategies and its own television channel. Over the years it has formed an alignment with the followers of the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and inevitably became part of the political conflict between 'Red Shirt' and 'Yellow Shirt' that eventually led to the 2014 coup d'état. It was one of the priority tasks for the military junta to investigate the Dhammakaya temple and to use this case to establish itself as righteous upholders of religion (Kulabkaew, 2010). The film was filmed during 2016-2017, during the height of the tension when the temple was locked down with many devotees inside.



Figure 2: Come and See (2019)

By being an aberration of the norm, the sect and its followers challenged the dominant ideology and the power of authority. With its expansion of wealth and the public display of the mass followers during Buddhist special days, this aberration had to be curbed and

punished in the eyes of the military Junta. At a time when the military took a firm grip on the nation, it could easily become a possible threat to the new reign. They needed to protect the Thai traditional trinity of nation, religion, and monarchy; a concept often used as an excuse for any coup d'états in the past with this instance being no different. Furthermore, the military junta claimed to own the right to decide what Buddhism should mean for the Thai people. They not only controlled religious faith but also the other two pillars of the trinity as well. Vichak Panich suggests that the 'fears of the Dhammakakaya as emblematic of the fears harbored by the cultural establishment' (Rojanaphruk, 2016). Dhammakaya is thus deemed a threat not only to religion but to the entire trinity. The sect and its devotees were then put in the same position as political opponents. Its devotees had to defend their faith with two bare hands against the military junta.

The film gives them a voice and offers a counter-narrative different from the mainstream media and one framed by the military junta. From what we normally hear from the mainstream media, which villainizes the sect and paints a strange picture of its followers, the film gives a rather different picture. *Come and See* shows us an insight into what the life of ordinary devotees look like, when we see them talk of the life changing experiences they had after becoming devotees. Instead of the conflict between the Dhammakaya and the military junta, the film carefully builds upon *Bumpen* and her family as a protagonist who stands by her faith. The audience views the situation from inside the sect through her participation in it. The film constructs a narrative for the audience whereby ordinary small people are facing up against the military junta. The way in which Dhammakaya's gigantic structure is portrayed in the film makes it that one cannot help but feel small and humble. In a way, the people are not only up against the military junta, they are also inevitably caved in by the dominant religious institution.



Figure 3: Dhammakaya's Buddhist Rite

The grandeur of the Dhammakaya's Buddhist rites contrasts with Theravada Buddhism, who form the majority in Thai society, preferring simplicity and closeness to nature. According to Rancière (2010), film and other art forms 'may open up new passages for political subjectivation, but they cannot avoid the aesthetic cut that separates consequences from intentions and prevents their from being any direct passage to an 'other side' of words and images' (p. 151). Throughout the film, religion is brought into the realm of politics, providing a space for the audience to rethink the question of faith. Not only in terms of religion but also, as the film was released in 2019, the other two pillars of nation and monarchy, during a time when the public seriously called them into question. The case of Dhammakaya demonstrates how 'dissensus' opens up a gap in contrast with consensus,

which is the means for the ‘police’ to manage the public by means of exclusion and prohibitions. For Rancière, ‘police’ refers to ‘the allocation of roles, positions, places, and functions in a social order on the basis of a set of assumptions about the competencies and qualifications of individuals and groups’ (Gündoğdu, 2017). According to Tanke (2011), ‘this form of consensus employs a particular series of operations to convert democratic struggles into a series of managed conflicts. It frequently exploits the cover of political realism, the doctrine that justifies war, social hierarchies, and economic inequalities by invoking necessity’ (p. 26). This is demonstrated by the military junta’s attempts to other the Dhammakaya from the rest of Buddhism and Thai society.

While *Come and See* directly challenges the dominant ideology towards Theravada Buddhism and the authority of military junta, *School Town King* (2020) does not seem to directly address politics but instead challenges a long-standing problem within the education institution. The heightened political awareness among the new generation made them raise questions towards the old establishment. The recent pro-democracy movement driven by the youth saw young students participate in flash mobs and campus protests. *School Town King* started filming in 2017 when we see the students voice their frustration through rap music, as their weapon to attack authority and the problems they face in life. Their courage to openly and frankly talk about politics in the crude language of rap music pushed these students out of the system which would prefer more docile students who are moulded accordingly. Peace and order are challenged by *Non* and *Book*, the two protagonists of the film. Certainly, school has to deal with this aberration that needs correcting just like any other non-conforming behaviour the school previously dealt with. The school system often resorts to violence, hitting students with a caning stick being the traditional method of punishment. The stick is a way of physical threatening analogous to the weapons used by the military junta.

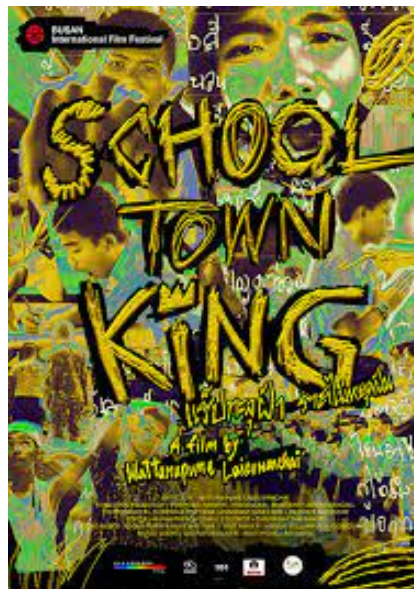


Figure 4: School Town King (2020)

School Town King gives us an insight onto how Thai people are prepared to surrender to authority by threat of the use of violence. The school environment is the wishful version of reality for the military junta. Every year, the Children’s Day slogan or the 12 virtues are what children are made to recite to unconsciously hypnotise them about how one should behave. It also prepares Thai people to be good citizens who are also prepared for the past 13 coup d’états and any more to come. “We live in reality not in a dream world.” This is what

View tells her friend, *Non*, warning him not to follow his senior, *Book*. *View* is the model student who complies with the rules and regulations in order to have a chance of getting a degree and a job like everyone else. His prime follower, *Non*, tries to tell *Book* with the hope that he should compromise with his dream, to be in the system as long as possible and follow his parents' dream. The film ends lamentably, as *Book* finally lets the audience into his head tells what inside his mind, when he cries out of guilt for failing to fulfil his parents' wishes out of wanting to be himself.

For many decade, Rap music has been used for political resistance. According to Morena Cuconato and Natalia Waechter (2012), the Middle East and Northern Africa have rap events that are used not only for personal expression but for mobilising the young masses (p. 150). This is the same in Thailand, wherein rap music is used to speak out about political injustice, poverty, social problem and the oppression felt by young people. It has become an anthem for the pro-democracy movement among the youth. In the context of 2020 when the film was released, the rap music of *Book* and *Non* no longer stood alone in the fight against the system they viewed as oppressive. Rap music in some ways invokes Rancière's dissensus. He associates it with the term 'political subjectivation' to explain the struggles of disenfranchised or marginalized groups who make themselves visible, audible while forcing a redistribution of the sensible. He emphasizes how this process entails disidentification, or breaking up of one's assigned identity, place, or role in an inegalitarian order (Gündoğdu, 2017). Rap music enables those under representative voices to be heard while also making a break with all political communication which privileges the political elite's perspective.



Figure 5: The Caved Life (2020)

The two films discussed above do not declare themselves as political films, but both use the recent political conflicts as a backdrop. The conflict started with the individual and takes us to the root of the problem, before moving onto a macro level. *The Caved Life* (2020) may not be about the contemporary political conflict, but it is undeniably a political film. It is similar to the first two in how it portrays the conflict of small people who become involved with the bigger picture. It centres on the aftermath of the Tham Luang cave rescue that took place in 2018. The film is divided into four short films directed by different directors.

The first film centres on a stateless football player, part of the Wild Boars football team, whose friends were trapped in the cave. He thinks he might be better off if he got stuck in the cave as the state may decide to give him a Thai citizenship and subsequently a better future. The bureaucratic process makes it ordinarily impossible for children to get citizenship. He struggles to pursue his dream in the same way many of the stateless children do in the area.

Unless some extraordinary event occurs and sheds light on this marginalized corner of society, which is what happens with the Tham Luang cave rescue incident. The second film is about a farmer who once sacrificed his rice fields in order for water to be drained from the cave. He alone has to fend his crops from any natural disaster without any help from the authorities. He believes that while the government does nothing to help him, it uses the law to slander small people like him. For people like him, maybe nature is less destructive than government policies.

The third film is about a buffalo herder who lives in the same fault zone as Tham Luang, and since the Tham Luang incident there has been a new urge to develop the area. While both the government and capitalists have their eyes on managing the area, the day-to-day struggle of a buffalo herder's family is far from the state's priorities. The mundane life of a buffalo herder is only concerned with caring for the wellbeing of his buffaloes and his family, while his surroundings change without help from any outsiders. Buffalo herders have been part of the rich history of the area for a very long time. But their voices have never been heard like those stuck in the cave. They have been left out from local history, and folklore legends only prefer noble people such as the Sleeping Princess associated with Tham Luang. Their ordinary life has often been ignored and they can only count the days until they totally vanish from society as modern life has taken over.

The last film is about a hill tribe student torn between family tradition and the modern world. When tourism took over the more traditional life of the locals, this meant that the younger generation were cut off from their past. With central policy being to promote tourism at the expense of local culture, their only connection to the past is through selling traditional souvenirs to tourists. School education is also centralised meaning that little relates to the protagonist's culture or everyday life in the area. Though her family have lived in Tham Luang for a very long time, she only began to learn about the cave after the incident.



Figure 6: The Caved Life (2020)

All in all, we see no solution for each of these people as their problems continue to loop, being metaphorically trapped like the ones trapped in the cave. “How many of you?” the now famous question posed by the first rescue team, asked about the number of survivors upon first contact, should also be directed to many other metaphorically ‘caved’ lives in Thailand. The traditional trinity, once again, becomes questioned particularly in terms of what it means to be a ‘nation.’ The voices of small people at the border towns, who have been previously neglected and given no participatory voice in political communication, in one way or another make themselves heard. The counter narrative of individuals, who are often ‘ignored,

marginalised or used as a tool to score political points also challenges what political communication often assumes is only associated with the political elite (Wasserman, n.d.).

Conclusion

This paper attempts to demonstrate how documentary films released during the pro-democracy movement, including *Come and See* (Boonprakob, 2019), *School Town King* (Laisuwanchai, 2020), and *The Caved Life* (2020) are prime representatives of the mentality of individuals who stand against authority. They contrast with the mainstream media's role of contributing to consensus, by subverting its narrative. According to Brian McNair, the media plays an important role in 'reinforcing and reproducing a generalized popular consensus about the inherent viability of the system as a whole'.¹ In a way, these films demonstrate Rancière's dissensus. In the recent political conflict, they also represent 'dissensus' in how they speak for the young generation calling for change. It is not only about changing the government, but the whole of Thai social structure, which by extension questions the basic tradition trinity. The three films centre on the small people who are up against the outdated system that governs religion, education, government bureaucracy and the demarcation of the notion of nationhood. According to Rancière, political change takes place when the disenfranchised forces a redistribution of the sensible. The films provide space for periphery subjects to stand against the official narrative of the state, and for the audience to reimagine a different scenario of eminent change urgently in need.

In the coming years, there will be several documentary films made in response to the political conflict of the recent years. This includes: *Breaking the Cycle* (Aekaphong Saransate & Thanakrit Duangmaneepon) about the charismatic leader of the now dissolved Future Forward Party; a new film by Uruphong Raksasad recording the protests of 2020, *Songs from the Angry People*; *Last Gen* (Sopawan Boonnimitra & Peerachai Kerdsint) about high school students and their involvement in pro-democracy movement. A crack in the consensus of society has begun to take place, and documentary films have become important tools for communicating a new discourse that will lead to change in society.

¹ Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, New York: Routledge, 2011, p.

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