

TOGETHER ALONE

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ABSTRACT

This paper proceeds from an interpretive critique of the work of Thai artist, Pratchaya Phinthong, in particular his recent 'mobile cinema' projects dealing with the structures and geographies of film dissemination. These works situate film consumption in Thailand at the intersection of two overlapping, but distinct, fields of cultural practice: Western modes of resistance to dominant intellectual property regimes; and an Asian/Thai context where transgression thereof is the norm – practices which also blur the political boundaries between public and private spheres. In this unstable zone of cultural commerce, piracy loses both its transgressive force and its libertarian romance; both its criminal and its critical dimensions demand to be rethought. What significance might it muster instead? What sort of challenges might it pose, if any, to the sanctity of text and authorship, or to the politico-economic order under which film is produced and distributed? To answer this, I will place film in Thailand within a local history of dissemination extending beyond that of the cinema, taking account of literary and even religious traditions, as well as the explosion and convergence of today's digital media networks. I argue that film must be understood as part of a wider political economy of information industries across which piracy plays an increasingly pivotal role.

Outline

1. Together Alone (Tho)
2. Piracy – an alternative history (Kulap)
3. The Limitations of Thai Film History – *nang krai yaa*
4. Film as pharmakon: the poetics of dissemination
5. Drug/Medicine (C.L., Syndromes, revise Tho)

CONTEXT of this research

Early stages - Recently gave a paper on what I call the 'alternative history' of piracy in Thai cultural history, charting anti-authorial practices – piracy, plagiarism, collaborative authorship and appropriation – in traditional and pre-modern cultural circulation.

First aim of this work is to see how tropes in contemporary (digital) cultural circulation might be continuous with much older practices. Meanwhile, the wider, philosophical concern of this work is the poetics of dissemination in Thai culture across a wide range of 'information industries'.

And in the process, declassify film discourse – articulate its place alongside other non-cultural industries like agriculture, drugs – and also shift the emphasis from the familiar themes of 'national cinema' and censorship towards how screen culture fits within Thai culture, i.e. not an exclusive domain of the nation state, but rather a wider, lived economic reality – a "general economy" (Bataille) – indeed, film as a kind of 'sovereign discourse'.

1. Together Alone

Disclaimers: 1st, that this research is embryonic – as much a proposal. 2nd that I am not a film scholar – step back – theoretical – apol: left-field.

I'll start not with a work of cinema, but a work of contemporary art that is *about* cinema. [images – info + film] Pratchaya's practice revolves around the idea of communally held information resources – such as libraries – and geographies of dissemination. His *Dong-na project* (2006-07), e.g., was a community development /

fundraising initiative – designed a library for Dong-na, a small village in his home province in Thailand’s impoverished NE ... His *Ephemeral Cinema* is an electric golf-cart cum-mobile screening unit. Deployed initially in BKK – guerrilla screenings of indie films in unsuspecting public spaces. (Subsequently to Taipei and Singapore, now Paris.) Finally, this interactive installation (Q.G., Platform): *Together Alone* (2006), a dark room in the gallery, domesticated with basic furnishings, free drinking water, a TV and DVD player. The room also contained a book, *151 Cinema* – a compendium of cult/art films, recently translated into Thai; a DVD collection of films featured in the book, based on the artist’s own collection, augmented with what was available in BKK and therefore incomplete; a DVD duplicator and a stack of blank DVDs.

I throw this work up as a kind of anxious object – an entrée into a set of problems around dissemination, connecting two overlapping, but distinct, fields of cultural practice: Western modes of resistance to dominant intellectual property regimes (Utopian piracy, P2P networks, copyleft, CC, etc etc); and an Asian/Thai context where transgression thereof is the norm.

2. Pirates of the Chao Phraya: reading Kulap

From here I’d like to jump back to the 1880s, bypassing the century of cinema, to a seminal moment for Thai literature and historiography: the unauthorised reproduction of texts from a Royal library by the “commoner intellectual”, historian, publisher and editor, K.S.R. Kulap Kritsanon (1834-1921). A well-educated and -travelled member of the nascent bourgeoisie, Kulap already had a reputation as a bibliophile when he entered royal service as a bureaucrat. He also mastered the technology - new to the Kingdom at this time – of printing, and built a successful publishing business at a time when there were but a handful of presses in the country.

By chance, the palace office nextdoor to Kulap’s was being used to store royal manuscripts during renovation of the Royal Scribes’ library. Kulap persuaded the prince charged with their care to lend him manuscripts overnight, one by one. Each night, he would row across the river to Wat Arun, where a team of henchmen would divide each manuscript up and transcribe it, whereupon Kulap would row back across the river and return it before dawn broke. These copies became the basis of Kulap’s amateur historiography, published in his journal, *Sayam Praphet*, often before they’d been published by the monarchy – creating a series of controversies and authorial mysteries that shaped the early history of dissemination in Thailand. It must be remembered that at the time, there was basically no 4th Estate – both print technology, and the moral/intellectual authority to publish, were monopolised by the palace. This episode has thus typically been historicized as a watershed in the undoing of this monopoly on historical knowledge, foundational for a certain heroic, even Promethean mythology – promulgated through the 20th C. by social historians – of a new class gaining access to the mode of reproduction.

It is certainly interesting as such – a transgression of royal prerogative over the nation’s literary and historical knowledge – and the tools of the very ‘civilisation’ imagined by the reformist monarchs of the 4th and 5th reigns. But it’s not simply an exemplary instance of **piracy** – for Kulap also “elaborated, emended, and corrected [these manuscripts] ... with his own insertions and speculations”, a liberty which earned him censure from the King, but which grounds his transgression in an enduring tradition of mixed authorship and creative appropriation.

For me this is a fascinating episode, not least for the way these documents confound the categories, the typologies, of the modern ‘text’: Genre, reproduction, literacy... *Authorship* too: The Western, modern, proprietary/individualist notion of authorship - I.P. – never rears its head. Even in his reprimands of Kulap, King

Chulalongkorn worries more about the authority of text *per se*, than about the authority of *authors*. Kulap literally *changed history*, sometimes using other written sources, but often simply his own memory or imagination – an oral trope: history as a work-in-progress, held in collective memory, continuously revised, refreshed and contested – a trope with a new resonance in the post-broadcast era of Wikis, blogs, open publishing, etc. So here's a window onto a highly **collaborative** form of authorship – translation and recension, involving poets and scribes, generations of erudite monks, nobles, and even kings, acting not simply as guardians of 'original' texts, and superintendents of their reproduction, but also adopting authorial and editorial functions.

All of which is to say that the authority and importance of a text – its valency and danger – has little to do with what Foucault called the 'author function'. These intensities converge, instead, on the **dissemination** function. Episodes like this highlight the need, I think, for a media history alive to local, traditional practices of dissemination (Circulation of ideas), to a medium's place in the symbolic and institutional fabric of the society. When we then look at *today's* global, digital exchange practices, and the laws imposed on it – we might better articulate their place in these traditions. Film ought not to be exempt.

3. The Limitations of Thai Film History / Distro vs Dissem

I favour **dissemination** – a looser term, a kind of reproductive poetics – over 'distribution', which implies a certain industrial logic (production / consumption, content / infrastructure), a set of technical, architectural, financial, legal, structures – limited by such social norms as demand, mores, foreign cultural influence etc. Most accounts of Thai film history conform to this roughly dialectical shape, with strong emphasis on distribution – firstly, because a majority of the content consumed there has been imported; and secondly, because the key *non-distributor* actors in this history (esp. state, military and royal) have thus targeted distribution in their attempts to shape it, furnishing us with a nice, oppositional, dialectical history: democracy vs Absolutism; social realism vs the elitist pyramid; and so on. King Prachadipok (VII) became a major player in the distribution business in the 1930s; we look to the Film Act of 1930, or the cultural edicts of the Phibun regime after that, or to the twists and turns of the censorship, tariff and taxation regimens imposed since.

I would say this Nation-centric approach, film history as reflection of modern state formation, is necessary but not sufficient: It has a number of drawbacks:

a) content is presupposed to exist; what's important, for both control and profit, is the channel → local production never a high priority.

b) it rarely articulates any distinction between 'elite' actors. e.g. palace, military and bureaucracy are conflated as 'state power', when in fact their respective relations to the technologies of film – as both producers and regulators – were rather varied.

c) it overlooks productions that aren't profitable, a neglect wrought in the production houses, then doubled in historiography.¹

d) it has tended to ignore the subtleties of alternative and local modes of presentation that, while immaterial in terms of revenue, still determined how large sectors of the population experienced the medium. Through the 1950s and 60s, e.g., Thai films were shot on 16mm without sound, and were presented with live soundtracks by Thai dubbers or the projectionists. Some became stars in their own right, liberally embellishing and improvising, in light of current goings on, animating and contextualising the moving image in ways scarcely imaginable by its 'authors'.

An obvious touchstone here is the *nang krai yaa*, a form of mobile cinema that for decades ensured the penetration of screen culture beyond the big population centres. I

¹ The 'schizmogeneration' Annette Hamilton described in the 90s – between the internationally-connected urban cognoscenti and the rest – still lingers, despite Thai successes on the international art-film circuit.

imagine this won't be unfamiliar to people here – and it's not unique to Thailand. *Nang* – the idiomatic word for movie, means 'skin' – this usage deriving from traditional puppet theatre. *NKY* – 'film sell medicine' [explain –IMAGE – touring from village to village; usually projected from back of a truck, at temple fairs; no tickets - herbal remedies sold at intermission].

Again, production and distribution are merged. Authorship is mixed, as in any oral tradition, familiar narratives continually refreshed. The renovation was not just in the soundtrack, but also the manual reconstitution of the films – often so over-used that the projectionists would have to recompose them, put their shreds back together on the road, in between screenings.²

Does film history tell us enough about the interplay between film and other media – traditional and contemporary? Is it responsive enough to the *local* cross-media environment around film – print, theatre or religious performance; later radio, TV, and now digital, networked and mobile media. (This taxonomic quarantine is mirrored directly at the level of legislation by the Film Act, which does not cover digital film.)

Now perhaps this sort of discursive enclosure is what film scholars want – I don't know. But for someone engaged in cultural studies more broadly, it proves rather inflexible. It is well known, e.g., that one of the Kingdom's first dissemination networks was a Palace 'film club' started by Vajiravudh and his coterie of aesthete princes. Cinema studies is apt to see this activity as something other than 'distribution'. Historians may be right that it was initiated in the spirit of some Oxbridge amateurism, but is 'club' the right word to describe this 'peer-to-peer network', when we know that its members were also active as producers and distributors of film, and that it emerged from within an existing literary circle devoted to discussions of poetry and history?

A 'poetics' of 'dissemination' ought to take in an array of cultural, social *and* commercial practices of knowledge circulation – authorised and unauthorised – from temple fair to cinema to palace, and beyond the 'cultural industries' (recent paper @ Chula). Digital and networked media demand this, for the development of Thai I.P. law – concepts like 'Piracy', e.g. – has been shaped not primarily w.r.t. to film, music, etc, but w.r.t. *other* knowledge industries – software, pharmaceuticals. We could add design, agriculture, health, etc., fields in which power itself – both state and multinational-corporate, is not only a regulator, but also an active 'pirate'. Witness Thailand's recent, controversial "Compulsory Licensing" of 3 patented drugs – a heart-disease drug and 2 HIV drugs, "without the consent of the (foreign) patent owner" – under the WTO's TRIPS Agreement.

4. Film as pharmakon: the poetics of dissemination

In conclusion, let's see if we might pursue this link between drugs and screen culture, beyond the cliché of 'the opiate of the masses'. Again – from palace to the villages.

In ancient Athens, the word *pharmakon* had an astounding range of meanings. While typically translated as 'medicine, drug, poison, or magical substance,' it also named the subjects of a particular ritual – scapegoats – wretched men reserved for sacrifice in the face of calamity (famine, invasion or plague) – i.e., when purification was needed.³ This 'pharmakon', both poison and remedy, is the central, ambivalent metaphor of Jacques

² Local cinema history – local tradition of mobile cinema – travelling screens. Esp. up north, rural areas – as elsewhere in SEA, West Africa (Ghana) 1980s – Latin American tradition of *cine movil*. In the west, arthouse cinephiles and contemporary art institutions have picked up these traditions, sometimes explicitly citing them in the PR materials, as a way of reclaiming and revivifying public space in the neo-liberal cosmopolis. http://www.ocularis.net/summer_03.html See Chuck Stevens, "Songs and Snake Oil", The Guardian, 30 May, 2003. <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,966585,00.html>

³ Hamilton identifies this sacrificial structure in the 1980s crackdown against film piracy. SEAsia, under threat of demotion in the general system of preferences. See Uphoff.

Derrida's essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', a text that is all about the movement from oral culture to recorded culture: in Plato, writing was a *pharmakon*, opposed to *logos* (speech) and distrusted. No sooner had writing emerged than it had fallen into suspect company – had been implicated with the dark arts, with drugs, with sedition. But Derrida also sustains the sacrificial aspect of the *pharmakon*, whose death or expulsion can restore the cosmic balance and cleanse the community - the poison that is also the antidote.

In Thailand, screen culture is the ultimate *pharmakon*: it was long administered in a similar way to opium – i.e., no serious effort at local production; a weak tariff, with well-known loopholes, and a high ('luxury') tax at the point of consumption (50%).⁴ Thai cinema is not without its pharmacological metaphors: e.g., the mainstream is *nam nao* – polluted water – the 'element of poison' (JD); or the NKY – films to sell drugs. Licit and illicit, poison and remedy, drugs are of course inherently **seminal**. The Thai qualifier for a pill or tablet is *met* – seed. The link is obvious with agriculture, with its ancient symbolic order not just explicitly connecting social status with rice-fields, but also welding political legitimacy to technologies of dissemination, irrigation, and so on. This nexus is today no less scrupulously maintained than it was 500 years ago: the King is credited with all manner of agro-technical innovations – attributed to His Majesty's initiative and beneficence *post ipso facto*, in return for either his encouragement or development funding. Monkey Cheeks; Cloud Seeding; Genetic engineering; organic farming. The King's 'active interest' in these problems is routinely immortalised in film by the Palace PR machine, often ending with a symbolic conferral of authorship (of the solution) from the project leader, to the King.

The long-standing affinity between screen culture and Medicine comes together succinctly in Apichatpong's latest feature, *Sang Sattawat*. An ageing monk consults a doctor at a rural hospital. He spins lengthy tales about premonitory dreams, as a pretext for bogus drug prescriptions to treat the unspecified ailments of the temple community. The encounter serves as a humorous window upon the intersection between science and superstition, between a modern, universal knowledge and another that is traditional, local, spiritual, indigenous – with two apparently incompatible notions of health. As viewers on the side of modernity, we are offered the naïve, gentle impieties of the old monk, who seeks to bypass the evidentiary procedures of medical diagnosis, even prompting his young adept to add his own complaints to the spurious, group claim. His gripes, and thus his claim on the healthcare system, are communal. There is no fixed, individual subject to be diagnosed, only referrals and hunches, ailments more karmic than physiological, invocations, folk explanations – stories. But these would be more than enough to justify treatment by the traditional animist-inflected medicine, still practiced in the rural NE.

But before asking what's at stake in the confrontation between these two orders of knowledge, let us ask: must there be a confrontation? For even as the monk seeks *pharmaceuticals* to counter his spiritual imbalances, he also divines and diagnoses on the fly certain ailments in the Doctor herself, turning the tables on her, he prescribes and doles out certain herbal remedies. A ploy to shake her resolve? Distraction? Indeed, we find later that the doctor – while resolute in the face of his requests – is not immune to superstition, when she mentions having consulted a fortune-teller. In both characters we have the coexistence of both knowledges. New knowledge doesn't necessarily displace belief, even when it appears to contradict it. Cf. Taussig on the witchdoctor: Skepticism is not inimical to, but rather integral to, the efficacy of magic. Initiates, like the doctor, may well see through the witch-doctor's trickery, yet this does not make her immune to his powers.

And it's precisely this **co-existence** that I seek to make out in the techniques of authorship as they have unfolded and overlapped in Thai culture, as new technologies of

⁴ This is how you regulate vice, something you don't want to appear to condone, and something you may one day need to exercise a total (sovereignty) control/prohibition over.

dissemination (print, cinema, digital media, etc) have encountered and converged with traditional knowledge and practices.