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**<title>** Itinerant Cinematic Practices In and Around Thailand during the Cold War

**<author>** May Adadol Ingawanij

This article returns to an untimely cinematic practice. Watching feature-length narrative films in rural and urban Thailand, and around the northeastern and southern borderlands, during the mid-20th century did not necessarily mean going to cinema theatres. Spectators experienced and encountered moving images on screen across multiples networks and proliferating exhibition sites. It was not exactly commonplace to project 35 mm film prints inside a theatre auditorium in which the machine for illuminating and animating images on the screen was hidden away in the projection booth, whereby the sounds filling the auditorium were mechanically reproduced recordings inscribed onto the audio track of the celluloid strip. This model of the filmic apparatus, previously mythologised as universal, tended to be applicable in a much more restricted context, in a proportion of the subtitled screenings in Bangkok's first-run cinemas. Yet even among these venues in the capital city, built in the architectural style of international modernism to stage fantasies of embodying global consumer culture, Thai and foreign language narrative films were, in fact, quite often transformed into multimedia live performance events. Often, in these modernist picture palaces, film screenings became, instead, shows advertising the presence of voice artists performing dialogues and sounds accompanying the projected images. Such events transforming the projection of celluloid prints into live performance were part of a cinematic practice<sup>1</sup> with an extensive reach even though it had peripheral cultural status.

—During the period in question, the predominant modality of cinematic encounter and experience would have been via itinerant makeshift cinema. Mobile film troupes criss-crossed

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I often use the term “cinematic practice” over “cinema”. This is partly to defamiliarise the still too commonly held assumption about the latter term as a cultural and industrial form defined by exhibiting/projecting feature-length films on a single screen in a range of market contexts, accompanied by repertoires of fandom. But it is also to signal that the question asked concerning the apparatus or dispositive of itinerant makeshift cinema, and the broader theoretical issue of conceptualising the interfacing of animism and cinema, is one to do with an ontology of cinematic practice rather than the creation of film styles. The phrase cinematic practice signals bodily experiences and encounters with mediated sounds and images as part of a spatial-temporal ambience or an environment. In this sense, the concept of cinematic practice implies the time-space of embodied contact and being in which the distinction between inside and outside, self and other, are blurred, and it implies immersion in spatially and temporally non-static, mediated worlds. See Pepita Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes: Here, Now, Me* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 1-20; Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

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the country, and wandered into territories beyond that of the nation-state, with their assemblage of technical tools, props, locomotive, and a small team of improvised members. The troupes usually comprised a projectionist, one or two voice performers or versionists,<sup>2</sup> an all-purpose assistant, driver or labourer, and, in some cases, a custodian of celluloid reels and ticket receipts. They were mostly men, but quite often a troupe would include a female versionist. Film troupes undertook long-distance travels to borderlands, highlands, and islands, embarking on their outward journeys by truck, train or bus from the capital city or from large regional provinces. Sometimes they would continue their voyage to remote towns and villages by van, truck, rickshaw, boat, or on foot, and in some cases even on elephant back. A variety of events above and beyond commercial ones aiming to sell tickets occasioned the arrival of the film troupes. There were shows to promote goods such as household medicines, batteries and malt drinks, to give offerings and thanks to the spirits, and also to propagate anti-communist messages and feelings.

— What kind of a cinematic apparatus is itinerant makeshift cinema? This question provides this article's starting point. It proposes to understand itinerant makeshift cinema as a cinematic apparatus, or, more precisely (as explained below), a dispositive whose ontological basis for manifesting images and occasioning bodily experiences of images are grounded in itinerancy of display, intensified durational dilation and indeterminacy, and a logic of transmission that associates presence and transformation with the exchanging and channelling of forces between the human and non-human. In exploring the ontology of itinerant makeshift cinema, it is helpful to highlight two components within the concept of cinematic dispositive itself: intermediality<sup>3</sup> and profanation.<sup>4</sup> In using these theoretical terms,

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this term see my article on voice performance and the circulation of Indian melodramas in cinema theatres in mid-20th century Thailand. May Adadol Ingwanij, "Mother India in Six Voices: Melodrama, Voice Performance, and Indian Films in Siam", *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 3, 2 (2012): 99–121.

<sup>3</sup> In film historiography, the concept of intermediality highlights the multiple uses of novel moving image tools and technologies within preexisting media practices. The implication of the concept is to point to the need to historicise the ways in which the possibilities of a new medium or audio-visual tool, in their period of emergence, would have had to function in relations of complementarity or dependence on older media practices shaped by broader cultural, artistic and institutional contexts. See, for instance, André Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> This idea is drawn from Francesco Casetti's film theoretical elaboration of Giorgio Agamben's discussion of profanation as acts of returning a consecrated thing to common use, and often through play. See Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the*

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my broader aim for this article is, first, to move towards conceptualising animistic cinematic practice as a theoretical task grounded, less in the animation of a constellation of images on screen, but in histories of the interfacing of “new” and “(very) old” media practices and medium ontologies in Southeast Asia. Second, the article’s methodological experiment is to use the case of itinerant makeshift cinema to approach an art historical issue concerning classifying and complicating the terminologies of traditional, modern and contemporary art and, relatedly, the question of tracing genealogies of artistic or aesthetic practice with multiple determinants and dynamisms of change. In conceptualising animistic cinematic practice, I turn to itinerant cinema to think about extra-institutional forms of artistic and aesthetic practices that mediate, interface and connect different temporal-spatial worlds and disparate ontologies, and whose status as traditional or modern is indeterminate and ambiguous. To anchor this work of conceptual articulation in concrete details, I draw on an oral history archive of interviews with versionists who were previously active on the itinerant circuit during the Cold War period, which I have been accumulating with my research collaborators in the past decade.<sup>5</sup> This archive is unsystematic in its coming into being. It gathers remnants and fragments of a form of cinematic practice which, due to a combination of the liveness of the practice itself and the dominant conception of film history as a history of an industrial-entertainment medium comprising feature films, studios, stars and directors, has tended to exist as a kind of unthought, peripheral and illegible yet there as a trace or presence, in scholarly, archival and public discourses about cinema in and around Thailand.

### <h1> Itinerant Makeshift Cinema and History Writing

Pioneering scholarly accounts of Thai cinema’s history, namely those penned in the 1990s and 2000s by Dome Sukvong and Scott Barmé, tend to emphasise the agencies and aspirations of royal members and Bangkok’s bourgeois elites in appropriating transnational

*Cinema to Come* (Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 67-97; Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> My excellent collaborators include Chanchana Homsap, Ida Aroonwong, Nuchjaree Jaikeng, Jirawat Saengthong, Richard Lowell MacDonald, Mary Pansanga and Tanatchai Bandasak. I am especially indebted to Chanchana, Nuchjaree, and Jirawat for helping me build up an oral history archive of interviews with retired versionists, by doing many of the interviews and helping me establish contact with the versionists and other practitioners such as projectionists who are so essential to thinking about cinematic practices in and beyond Thailand during the Cold War period. A fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust (2009–12) gave me the time and freedom to begin this research and accumulate the archive. Above all, I owe my gratitude to the retired versionists who generously gave their time and their wonderful stories.

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flows of film objects and forms to create a local-national variant of modern cinematic culture.<sup>6</sup> Their methodological approaches accord historiographic weight to the first efforts of Siamese royalty or Chinese and other diasporic cultural entrepreneurs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to build Hollywood-style filmmaking studios and air-conditioned art deco picture palaces, and to make narrative feature films with modern stories and visual surfaces using cameras purchased from trips abroad. Accordingly, the history of Thai cinema becomes a story of elite pioneers, mostly male personages who, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, doggedly pursued their ambitions to make feature-length narrative Thai films of a quality demonstrably matching an imputedly *sakon* or “universal” standard of technical production and formal accomplishment.<sup>7</sup> An emblematic figure within this framework of film-history writing is the important mid-20<sup>th</sup> century filmmaker Rattana Pestonji. He was a British-educated filmmaker, producer and advertising executive of Parsi origin, born at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who advocated the 35mm sound film format. Rattana distanced himself from the common practice among mid-20<sup>th</sup> century filmmakers in Thailand of making low-budget feature films using 16mm prints without recorded sound. Through his adoption of 35mm in his own directorial efforts, and his lobbying for the state to institute film industrialisation policies linked to incentives supporting 35mm filmmaking, Rattana tried to campaign for Thai filmmakers of his generation catch up with so-called developed filmmakers in the advanced world by adopting the format of the 35mm sound film as the means enabling the exporting of Thai feature films to international markets.<sup>8</sup>

— In recognising the aspiration of such figures to develop Thai cinema into an art and industry of narrative filmmaking boasting a so-called international calibre, a retroactive term of inclusion and exclusion comes into play. Historiographic accounts of elite aspirations to cultural modernity via fiction film production and western film consumption render certain practices legible within the adopted narrative framework. By the same token the significance, value and potential of other forms of cinematic practices, those which existed at the periphery

<sup>6</sup> Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Dome Sukvong, *Kamnerd nang thai* [The Birth of Thai Cinema] (Matichon, 1995); Dome Sukvong, *Phra bat somdet prha pokklao kap phapphayon* [King Rama VII and Cinema] (Ton Or, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> May Adadol Ingwanij, “Hyperbolic Heritage: Bourgeois Spectatorship and Contemporary Thai Cinema”, PhD dissertation (London: Birkbeck, University of London, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Rattana Pestonji, “*Utsahakam phapphayon thai*” [The Thai Film Industry], *Khvam rue kue pratheep* magazine (1962), <http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail.asp?id=20> [accessed 23 Oct. 2017].

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of the legitimised modern cultural domain or those that were dreams of becoming outside the logic of the dominant imaginary of national cultural modernity, tend to become obscured or underplayed. At the same time, pressing against the established historiographic account are fragments, residues, and layers of practices that deployed the techniques and tools of cinema to create their own apparatuses for performing moving images, and were cinematic in that sense, even if they were not quite legible as a cinematic practice within the terms of value embedded in the idea of cinema as an international commodity form of entertainment and as a surface embodying the fantasy of modernity of the nation's elites.

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A fragment in the memoir of Sathit Semanin, one of the pioneering modern bourgeois writers in Siam born at the turn of the 20th century, indexes in passing a genealogy of film exhibition as ritual performance at the moment of film's arrival in the country. In a book consisting of article-length memorabilia of ephemeral things and entertainments in Siam during the late 19th and early 20th century, Sathit recounts his first boyhood experience of encountering the motion pictures.<sup>9</sup> He was seven or eight years old and had not yet moved to the city. A travelling pictures troupe had turned up in his hometown, in what was then rural Ayutthaya, and had turned a pavilion on the grounds of the local temple into a motion pictures exhibition space. He could not remember how electricity was generated to power the show, but could recall that inside the pavilion kerosene oil lamps were used for illumination. For each lamp, a basket made of opaque material doubled up as a lamp shade, and a pulley system made with rope was used to take up or bring down the baskets in order to adjust the light level of the lamps during the reel change break. Sathit remembers seeing a few actuality films including images of a boat race, which he realised much later was actuality footage of the Venice regatta. The screen showed blurry pictures in a stuttering duration punctuated by rips and tears to the film strip. Sathit says that, nevertheless, the audience marvelled at seeing images of figures moving as if they were human. But some elders who went along to the show and found it not a match on the *likay* musical dance complained that all one could see were strangely mute yet gasping mouths, "unsightly, like ghosts". The children and the youngsters, the writer notes, found this novel form of moving image performance just marvellous.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sathit Semanin, "Nang chai mua 60-50 pee thi laew" [Film Exhibition 60-50 Years Ago], in *Wisasa* (Phrae Phittaya, 1970), pp. 24-46.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-7.

Significantly for our purpose, Sathit mentions that the occasion of the first motion pictures show he had encountered was the funeral of a senior monk at the Wang Daeng (Nua) temple at Tha Rua district in Ayutthaya. He also remembers that the wandering troupe was not specifically engaged by the hosts to put on the show during the monk's funeral. They happened to be at his hometown at the time, and was the sort of troupe that profited by exhibiting motion pictures at public gatherings. His recollection thus tells us that already during its first years, and upon its first appearance in Siam/Thailand, cinema had quickly become part of the repertoire of ritual performances, as well as an itinerant exhibition mode in non-urban areas. This fragment in Sathit's memoir is, in film archaeological terms, an illuminating fossil. It signals another possible origin, a virtual history of cinematic practices whose routes encompass travelling performances taking place outdoors in spaces whose purposes were other than entertainment, rather than cinema as a history of exhibiting films in urban picture houses. More importantly, this textual fragment points to a genealogy of cinematic practices that was both marginal to the national cultural modernist idea of urban commercial filmmaking and exhibition, and at the same time one that intertwines the tools of film recording and projection, or the capacities of this foreign technical apparatus, with an indigenous ideas of the presence, efficacy or usefulness of aesthetic or symbolic objects derived from institutional and non-institutional forms of religious practice.

**<h1> Dispositive of Itinerant Makeshift Cinema**

The media archaeological turn in film theory and history offers useful methodological pointers for situating itinerant makeshift cinema within an expanded definition of cinematic practice. This paradigm challenges the teleological underpinning of traditional film historiography and departs from the narrative structure that conceives early cinema as the immature nascence of a fledging art that attained maturity after the institutionalisation of industrial narrative films from the sound era. Importantly, for the purpose of this article, the methodological and theoretical interventions of media archaeology, exemplified in the writings of historians and theorists André Gaudreault, Thomas Elsaesser, and especially Weihong Bao, and Brian Larkin in non-western contexts, draw attention to the intermedial characteristics of cinema.<sup>11</sup> In other words, rather than investing in a traditionally modernist

<sup>11</sup> Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema*; Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology*; Weihong Bao, *Fervid Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

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idea of medium specificity linked to film's celluloid photographic base, this disciplinary turn instead maps cinema's long and variegated genealogical routes. The task of historicisation becomes tracing the incorporation of the cinematograph within a wide range of artistic and media practices, or as tools of techno-mediated practices extending human sensorial, observational, and bodily capacities such as scientific experimentation and military surveillance. Methodologically speaking, media archaeology pays attention to strong echoes between the present-day proliferation of cinematic experiences and non-theatrical spaces of immersion in cinematic apparatuses in daily life and society, and experimentations and uses of the mechanical moving image or the cinematograph in earlier eras occurring in contexts not usually thought of as activities and sites belonging to the institution of cinema.<sup>12</sup>

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Along with intermediality, another concept that came into circulation with media archaeology is the idea of the cinematic dispositive. This concept questions the preexisting theoretical model of spectatorship known as 1970s apparatus theory, which conceives the power of cinema over individuals according to the model of the totalising vision machine that functions to interpellate subjects and create illusions of reality through a spatial alignment of the projector, screen, and immobile spectator in a darkened auditorium. Instead, the concept of dispositive defines the cinematic apparatus as a contingent machine with a recursive capacity, an ensemble of projected moving image, sound, spatial, spectatorial and symbolic practices, whose composition at distinct periods and in specific locations is provisional and adaptive.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis of the concept of dispositive on the contingent nature of technological, material and symbolic assemblages constituting a mutable cinematic apparatus is very useful for thinking about itinerant makeshift cinema. Approaching the latter as a kind of intermedial cinematic dispositive/apparatus draws attention to the ways in which such practices functioned and grew during the Cold War period through historically contingent intersections of otherwise unrelated material, infrastructural and symbolic elements. Conceptualising itinerant makeshift cinema as an ensemble or bricolage of disparate entities and networks should also encourage us to view the enmeshing of mobile film projection technologies with traditional forms of ritual and performance as a contingent development, rather than a case study of the localisation of new foreign technology by old agencies of local aesthetics.

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<sup>12</sup> Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology*, pp. 17-68, and 71-134.

<sup>13</sup> Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, pp. 67-97.



Fig. 1 file name fig1\_ThaiRath\_11141976. Caption: An article in *Thai Rath* newspaper dated 11 November 1976 titled '*Chiwit phor khua nang rae* [The Life of an Itinerant Film Exhibitor]'

# Space-time of Itinerant Makeshift Cinema

What comprised an itinerant film troupe? In one of his tales, the versionist-turned-writer Wasan Akradate gives a vivid, detailed description, drawn from his past experiences as a travelling performer, of the ensemble of tools and bodies making up the troupe.<sup>14</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s he traversed the southern and northeastern regions of Thailand, and during the Vietnam War often crossed into Laos to entertain the troops in army camps or to perform in cinema theatres in Vientiane. For one of the trips to Udon Thani province in the northeast the troupe of four consisted of Wasan himself as the sole versionist for male and female voices, the projectionist, the driver and an errand boy. They set off in a small, old truck. In the back compartment were the following equipment: an electricity generator weighing 3 kg, a 16mm RCA projector, an electric transformer, fuse box, cable, bulbs, pickup switch, record albums of popular singers at the time such as Suraphol Sombatcharoen, a bag containing feature-film reels, another bag containing newsreels produced by the US Information Service (USIS), a microphone, speakers, screen, manila rope, fabric for creating an enclosure around the screen in order to charge ticket entry, hammer, knife, paper tickets, rice cooker, water container and a sewing machine in case the fabric needed mending.<sup>15</sup>

Wasan's trip that time was to put on a film performance in the open space of a small village charging ticket entry. But there proliferated other models for the voyages of mobile film troupes. Enterprises such as pharmaceutical brands Osotsa and BL Hua had their own itinerant film troupes, which would travel to rural localities to show films free of charge, and then exploit the reel change intervals to sell the brand's pills and treatments. The *Kop* (Frog) battery brand extended its market reach to rural consumers in need of power for their torches and portable radios in a similar manner.<sup>16</sup> Other mobile troupes were funded by police, military and local authorities to travel to villages in zones demarcated as pink and red, using

<sup>14</sup> Wasan Akradate, "*Phi pathirup* [Reformist Ghosts]" in *Lakhon khon 1* [Human Dramas 1] (Bangkok: CP Books Standard, 2004), pp. 209–21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 212–3.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Pongkorn Promkul by Chanchana Homsap, 28 Mar. 2012.

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the film show as a pretext for carrying out campaigns to win hearts and minds and to proselytise the “free world”<sup>17</sup>

Of particular theoretical interest is another, related kind of film show, a ritualistic practice which seems to have expanded in reach and frequency from the mid-20th century, and still retains a residue in the present. These are film projection performances addressed to the spirits or other forms of powerful non-human presence. Such performances would take place at auspicious or existentially profound times, on sites charged with sacral or primordial potency. Individuals regarded as important figures in the locality hosted these ritual projection performances at potent moments in the cosmological calendar, such as the cyclical celebration marking the end of the harvest. Ritual projection shows came to be part of the duration of syncretic Buddhist ceremonies marking singular moments in a human life cycle, such as a funeral or men’s ordination into monkhood, or those occasions connecting the human realm with the sacred or the supernatural, such as a merit-making ceremony to transmit good karma to the dead. Film projection also became part of a related, emphatically transactional kind of ritual practice, which entailed individuals’ exchange with the spirits or other powerful non-human presence by pledging a specific duration of projection performances in return for the latter’s supernatural intervention to realise their wish.<sup>18</sup>

Outdoor film performances usually began in the evening and went on until the early hours. In this extended duration feature films were shown in succession, though it would not be quite accurate to describe them as double or triple bill screenings in the standard sense of the term. Celluloid projection of several feature films, often using scratched and discoloured junk prints, which sometimes contained unauthorised re-edits, was, in this context, a kind of live, multimedia performance. A versionist or two would be physically present with their microphones to ‘version’ the sounds and dialogues on the spot, often improvising their performances and making references beyond the film script, accompanied by musical soundtracks and ambient noises from the portable record player and the surrounding natural and human environment. Monkey chants and cicada cries were as much part of the

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Boonsong Utsa by Chanchana Homsap, 21 Sept. 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Lowell MacDonald, “Projecting Films to Spirits: On Shrines as Conjunctural Space and the Ritual Economy of Outdoor Cinema in Bangkok”, *Visual Anthropology Review* 33, 2 (2017): 152–63; and “Film Projection and the Sacred Geography of Site-Specific Cinema in Contemporary Thailand”, in *Practices of Projection*, ed. Gabriel Menotti and Virginia Crisp (forthcoming).

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performance as the amplified human voices and recorded music. As much a part of the spectacle as the versionists with the microphone – the human elements of the cinematic apparatus – was the technical and nonhuman ensemble of mechanical tools, sculptural and spatial materials, light sources, and the presence of incidental beings. Itinerant outdoor projection shows did not just feature animated images on the screen but a whole assemblage of sights and objects removed from daily life: the US or Japanese brands of projector, the record player and speakers, the van transporting the performers and housing the projector, the scaffolding made of wood found in the locality for hanging the screen made of white cloth, the light cone emanating from the projector attracting dancing moths and fireflies, and the spotlights or decorative lights illuminating the dark open areas surrounding the screen.<sup>19</sup>

Many elements of this picture of a highly distinctive mobile cinematic apparatus would have been shared across commercial, propaganda or ritual contexts of exhibition. Significantly, though, as Richard MacDonald's important study of present-day residues of ritual projection performances points out, what differentiates ritual film shows from other contexts of itinerant exhibition is that these performances are addressed to powerful non-human presence rather than to corporeal, human spectators.<sup>20</sup> From a theoretical point of view the implication, in terms of the structure of address of ritual projection performances, is highly significant. The precondition enabling these performances, that is, the expectant and potentially dangerous presence of spirits, deities and potent non-human beings in a spectatorial capacity, overturns foundational humanist assumptions in film, media and modern art theories of spectatorship regarding the place of human spectators as targets of address, receivers of message, objects of sensorial stimulation, or participants in a work's becoming. Ritual projection performances are thus, in this sense, especially fertile theoretical objects to return to within a disciplinary context endeavouring to use concrete examples routed through Southeast Asia to generate vocabularies for discussing aesthetic experiences and art practices, forms and values.

<sup>19</sup> Chaiya Wannasee, "Nang lom pha [A Film Show in the Fabric Enclosure]" in *Nang lom pha* (Matichon, 2011), pp. 57–70.

<sup>20</sup> MacDonald, "Projecting Films to Spirits: On Shrines as Conjunctural Space and the Ritual Economy of Outdoor Cinema in Bangkok", pp. 154–57.

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Fig 2, file name ThaiRath\_18 Aug 1969. Caption: A photograph in *Thai Rath* newspaper dated 18 August 1969. The caption says that the makers of the film *Taal Diew* took 35mm and 16mm reels of the film to be blessed by a monk for auspiciousness.

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The concept of dispositive/apparatus would, in this case, also point to a geopolitical infrastructural development as one of its constitutive elements, alongside the ensemble of tools and bodies described above. From the mid-1950s, soon after Thailand became a client state of the United States, the military dictatorship initiated major road and highway building projects linking the capital to the regions. These projects were funded largely by the US in preparation for anti-communist operations and surveillance activities. In particular, highway construction work extended into Isaan, the northeastern region bordering Indochina, and included the plan to build a strategic road loop linking the network of US army bases in the region.<sup>21</sup> Such war-fuelled infrastructural expansion facilitated the mobilisation of troops and military personnel, and at the same time made it possible for mobile film troupes of various kinds to reach previously inaccessible towns and villages. The journeys on these roads were often long and physically arduous. Isaan-born versionist-turned-1980s social realist filmmaker Surasee Phatham remembers travelling on them to get to an army camp situated far away from the centre of Udon Thani province for his first job as a versionist, performing a live versioned show of an Indian mythological film. The troupe was taken on an army vehicle which drove out from the province for a long distance on challengingly bumpy roads filled with potholes. The site of performance was on the open ground of the camp surrounded by barrack huts and tents.<sup>22</sup>

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The availability of the technical elements of the itinerant cinematic apparatus, the 16mm projector and accompanying audio tools, was also partially intertwined with the same history of Thai-US military cooperation. Small gauge (8mm and 16mm) film cameras and projectors were among those mid-20th century gadgets and consumer grade audio-visual devices that flowed into Thailand with the mobilisation of US personnel for military and propaganda purposes. Nithiwit Thaninsurawut, a sound recording studio owner in Udon Thani and

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<sup>21</sup> Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*. SEAP Publications. 239; Fineman, Daniel, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), p. 181.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Surasee Phatham by Chanchana Homsap, 5 July, 2011.

collector of obsolete film equipment and cinematic ephemera, is a lifelong cinephile whose love of films, nurtured precociously early in life, is intimately tied to Udon Thani's Cold War history as a major regional base for the US military.<sup>23</sup> Born in the early 1960s to a prominent Sino-Thai business family in the province, his father, a keen amateur photographer and filmmaker, bought Nithiwit his first Magnon 8mm projector when he was a grade three schoolboy.<sup>24</sup> Later, he acquired his secondhand 16mm camera and projector from sex workers whose profession had turned them into a kind of contact zone between the city and the US army camp. A trade route of sorts came into operation with the workers selling goods the soldiers no longer needed to the city's inhabitants.<sup>25</sup>

Fig. 3 file name Fig3\_Nithiwat and p'Khaek. Caption: Interview with Nithiwat Thaninsurawut and Songdej Khan, ex-projectionist and archivist of old photographs of cinemagoing and film exhibition in Udon Thani. The place is Nithiwat's studio surrounded by film and cinemagoing ephemera in his collection. From left to right: Tanatchai Bandasak, Nithiwat, the author, Chanchana Homsap, Songdej.

A parallel route for mobilising small gauge film reels and projectors to the northeast, and sometimes beyond the border into Laos, was via the propaganda work of the United States Information Agency (USIS). Central to its operation to promote the idea of US-Thai special relations and to spread anti-communist messages were itinerant film shows. A fascinating publication comprising letters written home to the US from Nakhon Ratchasima in the mid-1950s by an American couple who was stationed in the province's newly opened USIS centre gives a good idea of the extent to which propaganda activities revolved around mobile film exhibition. The Medds would turn the USIS office library into an attractive place in the evenings for the local population by organising film screenings on 16mm, combining a USIS propaganda film with cartoons to entertain the children.<sup>26</sup> They made regular trips with their team of projectionists and announcers to outer districts and villages with the USIS troupe offering outdoor film shows as part of the long and frequent duration of religious celebrations

<sup>23</sup> Nithiwit is also the founder of a popular website and web board for outdoor film lovers in Thailand called Peoplecine.  
<sup>24</sup> Interview with Nithiwit by Chanchana Homsap, 24 Sept. 2012.  
<sup>25</sup> Conversation between Nithiwat May Adadol and Chanchana at his recording studio in Udon Thani, 27 Dec. 2012.  
<sup>26</sup> Jola Lytle Medd and Charles Leighton Medd, *A Last Frontier* (New York, NY: Writers Club Press, 2001), p. 47.

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and rituals.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, in one letter they thank their family for corresponding with the authorities in the US requesting entertainment films to be included in the USIS programmes. In their view, combining films such as Felix the Cat or westerns with routine propaganda films would be a more effective tool for promoting the image of the US as a benign friend to Thailand.<sup>28</sup>

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USIS activities in Thailand decreased with the US withdrawal from Vietnam. With that, the mobile film projection equipment that the service had accumulated were passed onto local propagandists. Boonsong Utsa, now an elderly monk in Nongkhai province, worked as a propagandist for the Border Patrol Police in the 1970s. He would travel to target villages in a small troupe of three, which included a projectionist, and would spend around two to three weeks at each place carrying out a ritualistic method of mass psychological manipulation.<sup>29</sup> During the day, the troupe would ingratiate itself in village life by taking part in activities such as repairing the road and track running through the village, cutting grass and building a fence around the village. At night, the troupe would organise entertainment activities. Some nights this would take the form of showing an anti-communist feature film using the projection tools handed down to his unit from USIS. Boonsong would make long, flowing announcements during the reel change break, exploiting the poetic capacities of the Thai language to create hypernationalistic announcements that appealed to the senses with rhyming flourishes. His verbal performance, a mode of incantation he could still fluently reproduce when interviewed in 2012, was part of the method to ritualistically and affectively create the bond of patriotic love between the villagers and the mobile troupe, as a symbolic embodiment of the state and, in this way, reproducing the ideological boundary separating Thainess from communism.<sup>30</sup>

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Elaborating the concept of the cinematic dispositive, film theorist Francesco Casetti draws on Giorgio Agamben's definition of profanation as acts that return to common usage what had been set apart through consecration.<sup>31</sup> The provisionality of ensembles constituting the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 82–3.

<sup>29</sup> See Katherine Bowie's anthropological study of the method and effect of a royal-endorsed network called the Village Scout to create hypernationalist, anti-communist subjects through sensorially intense ritual. Katherine Ann Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Boonsong, 21 Sept. 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, p. 79.

cinematic dispositive or apparatus endows spectators or users with certain capacities to profane the technical tools of cinema and their associated ideological underpinning. As a concept, cinematic dispositive signals room for subjects to manoeuvre within a malleable apparatus.<sup>32</sup> Thinking about itinerant makeshift cinema in relation to this idea of profanation would draw attention to improvisatory usage of the technical tools of mobile film projection and the adaptive configuration of the space and time of film exhibition. Such activities operated as marginal agencies within dominant networks and configurations of cinema, yet itinerant practices embodied the potential to extend the possibility of cinematic encounter and experience beyond its dominant experiential territories and sites pertaining to commodification or to propaganda interpellation. In this sense, the significance of itinerant makeshift cinema might be said to lie in the way that their improvisatory dispositive repeatedly displaced certain markers of the modern in cinema. In a parallel logic, the next section reflects on the ways in which itinerant makeshift cinema simultaneously repeated and displaced key markers of the traditional in Thailand's indigenous epistemology of art.

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Boonsong's account signals one kind of history of the interfacing of the ritual form and the mobile cinematic apparatus to create an instrument of propaganda, whose purpose was to exploit the duration of sensorial and affective intensity instigated by the mobile troupe's visit to target villages to inculcate hypernationalist subjects. As an alternative to this instrumentally ideological model, other traces of itinerant cinematic practices would seem to imply greater room to linger and to play in temporally dilated or temporally altered durations of cinematic events and performances, those which have yet to foreclose an opening towards transformation. Relics and fragments for this task are scattered among the memories of retired itinerant versionists, as well as in the tall tales, cheap paperback memoirs, and fictions written by them and by writers with cinephilic childhood memories of long nights spent at the outdoor film shows. Among these, two recurring tropes are especially striking: the durationally expanded performance exceeding traditionally defined points of beginning and end in filmic running time, and, relatedly, the journey to and from the film show as part of the experience of the expanded duration of cinematic performance, and at the same time as an encounter with and immersion in overlapping time-space dimensions.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 78–87.

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Fig 4 file Projection\_Van. Caption: An old photograph of a projection van advertising the Sunlight soap brand bought by the author from a vendor in Songkhla province in 2009. Anonymous, undated.

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Did the outdoor film show begin with the turning of the 16mm reel and the first flickering appearance of images moving on the cloth screen? Or did time begin to thicken with the sight of the bamboo trunks being cut in preparation for the arrival of the itinerant troupes? Pongkorn Promkul, a versionist born in the early 1960s who grew up in a district in Yasothon province in the northeast, can still vividly describe his boyhood memory of the activities initiating the film show event that his mother took him to. We might now think of this event as installation activities leading up to the first appearance at night of the images on the screen from a 16mm Thai fiction film starring the biggest romantic leads of the 1960s, Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat.<sup>33</sup> Prior to the arrival of the itinerant troupe the host of that film performance had selected the straightest trunks of bamboo to be cut into evenly sized rods. Once they arrived the troupe used these rods to construct a frame for hanging the white cloth they had brought with them. A rope was used to attach the cloth onto the mounted, square-shaped bamboo frame, using a method of knotting each edge of the rope to the frame, then pulling the rope at an angle of 45 degrees to the ground to stretch the white cloth into a taut plane, turning it into a flat screen surface that would remain so against the night wind. The troupe placed the 16mm projector on a rectangular bamboo bed (*khrae*). The horn speakers they had brought with them were tied to the bamboo rods on each side of the screen. In Pongkorn's memory the activity of the exhibitor and the spectator would become one during the installation. Even as a young boy he would help pull the rope. In the flow of his recollection four decades or so afterwards, his participation in the installation of the cinematic apparatus weaves seamlessly with his impression, now as a spectator, of the attractive sight of the signature six-wheel truck of a malt drink brand with its own promotional projection troupe. The mark of quality of the Ovaltine troupe, as an itinerant exhibitor with one of the best film selection, was its beautifully decorated truck with an image of the orange Ovaltine tin at the back.

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Fig 5 file Genghis Khan procession. Caption: A procession promoting the 1965 film *Genghis Khan* in Udon Thani province. This is an example of the way that cinema entrepreneurs

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Pongkorn. 28 Mar. 2012.

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borrowed certain ritual forms of religious and older entertainment festivities to promote films.  
Acknowledgement: This anonymous, undated photograph comes from the collection of  
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— Or did the duration of the cinematic encounter event begin with amplified sound floating from the distance during the day, audible in and around the village even before the activity of mounting the bamboo frame, announcing the exciting prospect of the upcoming film show that night? The writer Chaiya Wannasee has written a short story that describes in visually concrete detail the temporal and spatial textures of an itinerant film show in a northeastern village.<sup>34</sup> The narrator is a young cowherd, one among a group of boys in the village whose parents cannot afford to keep in school once they had finished sixth grade. References in the story to the carbon arc type of batteries powering the projector beam, and the Kedthip radio drama troupe, situates the chronological time of the story in the 1970s. The story opens with the wave of sound “*nang nang nang*” [movie! movie! movie!], first audible from one end of the village and relayed through the shouting of the same phrase by whoever happened to hear it until the sound reaches the group of young cowherds sitting under a bo tree around a portable radio.<sup>35</sup> Later in the evening the boys congregate at the temple ground, which has been transformed into a movie performance site charging ticket entry. A makeshift wall made from a long stretch of large fabric creates an enclosed area around the mounted screen and the projection car. The boys pay the children’s rate of two baht each to pass through the entrance some hours before the start of the first film. They play in the enclosure, excitedly imitating gestures and actions remembered from other movie shows, and watched the projectionist test the machine and adjust the light cone tilting shakily up towards the evening sky until the whole area of the square cloth screen is evenly illuminated.<sup>36</sup>

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— The propaganda film shows by Boonsong’s troupe affirmed a ritualistic temporality of the kind that was both cyclical (in the sense of the repetitive utterance of hypernationalism) and disciplinary. Compared to other forms of itinerant cinema each screening event lasted only a short time. Only one anti-communist feature film was permitted to be shown per night to metonymically associate the moral purity of the troupe with the ability to end the event at a

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<sup>34</sup> Chaiya, “*Nang lom pha*”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 57–9.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 63–4.

relatively early time before 11 pm.<sup>37</sup> Other modes of itinerant cinematic performances seem to have greater scope for licensing uncertain end points. Performances charging ticket entry, or product promotional and ritual shows, would usually comprise at least three feature films. As with the dynamic observed earlier that itinerant cinematic practices implied a broadening of the notion of the beginning of a performance, in some cases their durational expansiveness also displaced the idea of a temporally and spatially demarcated ending. The clearest example of this is the leeway afforded to itinerant film troupes to improvise the number of film reels projected very late into the night or in the early hours, in the duration when the number of human bodies around the screen has already dwindled and those still remaining in the space may have already drifted off. On such occasions it was common practice to “lift” a reel or two from the last item or so in the programme and smooth over the audacious ellipsis in plot development with whatever the versionist could come up with at that moment.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, itinerant cinematic performances also displace the dominant convention of the duration of exhibition established by the industrial practice of ending a show when a feature film exhausts its running time.

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Fig 6 file ThaiRath\_26091971. Caption: A photograph from *Thai Rath* newspaper dated 26 September 1971. The caption says that a group of male and female versionists are socialising by a lake in Sakon Nakhon province.

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More striking still is the weaving of the journey experience into the dilated temporality of the cinematic events and encounters themselves. Traces of such interweaving of the experiential duration of the performance and that of journeying, as a kind of time travel, are scattered in the recollections of many versionists about their adventures in arriving and leaving the performance site. Their tales and oral memories keep in virtual existence the thrills and terrors of the long journey undertaken on a series of weather-beaten transport, made more memorable still by the capriciousness of the rain, the wind and the waves, the mechanical breakdowns on poorly constructed roads and the winding paths and lanes charting an embattled manmade route through anterior land thick with old trees and tangled creepers. These are tales of the sensation of transitioning into another, parallel world, or of

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Boonsong.

<sup>38</sup> This is mentioned in the interview with versionist Kamnueng Yongchai, originally from Chaiyaphum province in the northeast. Though he emphasises that he would personally avoid doing it. Interviewed by Chanchana Homsap. 4 May. 2012.

the bodily perception of being immersed in spatial-temporal coordinates in simultaneous, overlapping existence.

—Singthong Sanamthong, a retired versionist in southern Thailand, spent his childhood in Bangkok but later was sent with his sister to live in Nakhon Sri Thammarat province, where their uncle had a mobile film rental service. As a teenager enamoured with the movies he assisted the service and ran errands for a local cinema theatre. Shortly afterwards, in the 1950s, Singthong started out performing on the peripheral edges of the southern itinerant circuit. The troupe would spend a month performing films on Samui island, travelling by sea quite literally around the island to get from one destination to the next. They would take a large long-tailed boat, of the kind with partial roof coverage, either from a port in Surat Thani or Nakhon Sri Thammarat, and sail towards the main pier at Nathon district on the island. From that pier, they would go all the way round Samui island putting on shows, disembarking at each of the 17 destinations, and ending the journey back at Nathon.<sup>39</sup> His sister, who adopted the performance name of Sriwan, also became a successful southern versionist. Unlike her brother, she fell involuntarily into the role in her early 20s when their uncle's film service found itself short of a female performer. In her recollection she was the thin, scared, reluctant young woman, the only female in the troupe.<sup>40</sup> Sixty years or so later she could still recount, in amusingly lively detail, the shock to her senses of the first few journeys on boat to coastal destinations such as villages and small towns in Satun province in the far south. After a performance, the troupe would pack the equipment into boxes and line them up in the boat. She would sleep on top of these boxes as the boat made its way along the shore in the pitch black of night towards the next destination, the only audible sound being the distinctive rasping from the engine. By daybreak they would arrive at the next destination. Sriwan would lie waiting in the boat, hungry, while the men in the troupe took the equipment ashore and spent the morning wandering around the village announcing the film performance attraction that night. On the first of these trips, when it was finally time to get off the boat to have breakfast, she could still recall the initial shock to her taste buds of biting into an omelette fried using coconut rather than groundnut oil, whose beautifully golden sheen was offset by a jarring scent. The ubiquity of coconut oil in cooking becomes, in her story, a sensorially potent metonym of encounter with difference, signalling the perceptual

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Singthong by May Adadol Ingawanij, 17 Sept. 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Sriwan by Nuchjaree Jaikeng, 21 Mar. 2011.

disorientation of entering another space-time. Still strongly alive in her memory of involuntarily becoming a versionist is the experience of journeying from the city into another world. In her memory, she was the urban girl who had grown up in the capital city and moved to a southern urban centre, who wore trousers instead of the ubiquitous sarong worn by the women in the towns and villages she was touring around. Her tongue had yet to acclimatise to the coconut oil she associates in her memory as a “Muslim ingredient” used by locals in Muslim majority coastal towns and villages on the far southern circuit.

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Another trope of journeying to the performance site, in this case as an entanglement in overlapping space-time, recurs in the tales of the versionist and storyteller Wasan. His short tales, initially published in a popular weekly magazine of the 1980s in a series titled *nak phaak phanaejon* [the itinerant versionist], are a kind of travelogue fiction. Often, they repeat the salacious cliché of the male adventure format, and tell of the narrator Wasan’s conquest of native young women, starstruck in the presence of the travelling performer, in the small hours after the last reel had played and the electricity generator was switched off.<sup>41</sup> Equally as often, though, his tales tell of sensorially intense otherworldly encounters during the journey. A trip to perform the Thai film *Kiatissak thaham sua* (1965) at Pho Taak village on the periphery of Udon Thani province in the northeast, presumably in the mid or late 1960s, was one such occasion.<sup>42</sup> The small old truck with the troupe of four, three men and an errand boy, set off from Nakhon Ratchasima province in the lower part of the northeast, speeding northwards along the half-finished, US-funded Mitraphap highway, leaving a plume of dust as they went. Around 8 pm, as large dark grey rain clouds rolled in, the truck turned off the main road onto a plough track surrounded by groves some kilometres from the destination. Heavy rain began to lash down and the lane quickly became flooded. The truck soon got stuck in a large pot hole, and no amount of pushing by the three men and one boy in the troupe could make it budge. In the narrator’s telling, they were about to resign themselves to spending the night in the car when five shadowy male figures came up to them unperturbed by heavy rain. Dressed like male villagers in dark fishermen’s pants and bare torso, the group of five pushed the car with seeming ease and, in no time, the troupe was ready to continue its journey. To show gratitude Wasan offered the group a lift and asked if they were heading to the village, to which the reply were silent shakes of the head as the figures pointed to a large old tree by the

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<sup>41</sup> Wasan Akradate, *Lakhorn khon 1* [Human Dramas 1] and *Lakhorn khon 2* [Human Dramas 2] (Bangkok: CP Books Standard, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Wasan Akradate, “*Phi pathirup*” [Reformist Ghosts].

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roadside. The troupe made it safely to the village where they were told by the headman that the five mysterious figures who had come to their rescue were brothers killed many years ago near that old banyan tree.<sup>43</sup>

— Rather than pondering the veracity or otherwise of such tales, it is more fruitful to approach them as figures signalling the ontological capacity of itinerant makeshift cinema to intensify an experiential enworlding and a way of being in the world characterised by spatial and temporal transitoriness, and, in particular, and intimacy of dwelling in the temporally heterogeneous. Fictions and embellished recollections such as Wasan's teach us that itinerant makeshift cinema's own temporal and spatial dispositions engendered a certain modality of worlding and of bodily experience.<sup>44</sup> The nomadism conferred on the film troupes, and the virtual mobility that itinerant cinematic performances promised to spectators, especially those in remote locales, implied cinematic encounters and experiences whose rhythm, intensity and ideological underpinning overlapped only partially with those modalities of sensation identified in established film theoretical models concerning the relationship between spatial and temporal mobility and cinematic experience.

— It is tempting to branch off at this point with three speculations. First, the theoretical proposition concerning the affinity between rail travel and early cinema spectatorship in the west, as exemplified in the works of Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Lynn Kirby, points to the interplay between panoramic vision, speed, colonial spatial conquest and spectatorial experience as bodily sensations of overstimulation and shock.<sup>45</sup> While itinerant makeshift cinema similarly relied on a geopolitics of infrastructural expansion, the film troupes' experiences of traversing distances along the newly laid and always only partially completed roads and highways, reverberated less with the trope of speed and technologically facilitated panoramic vision than one of delay and bodily immersion in ambient spaces charged with primordial presence, opacity and temporal indeterminacy. For spectators of itinerant film performances in remote locales during this period, the sensation of virtual spatial mobility

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 216-20.

<sup>44</sup> It is relevant to note here that versionists occupied an ambiguous position in relation to the images on the screen. They are part of the projection apparatus and, at the same time, are neither inside nor outside the fictional world on the screen.

<sup>45</sup> Lynn Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

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would have been triggered by images of other times, spaces and worlds on the enlarged screen, as well as by the chance to come into physical proximity with that otherworldly configuration of human and technical assemblage constituting the mobile cinematic apparatus. Such sensations of proximate encounter with radical difference through actual or virtual movement and motion were not necessarily, or were not always, counter to modernity's spatial practices of expansion and domination. Yet, unlike colonisation's dominant trope of spatial conquest, the figure of contact implies an ambiguity of touch and a possibility of intimate entwinement.

Second, as hinted in Sriwan's recollection of her nomadic existence as a young versionist on the peripheral southern circuit, itinerant cinema was, significantly, a terrain of artistic practice available to women who, at that time, could not access institutional artistic training, and who were neither born into an economically privileged household nor an artistic lineage.<sup>46</sup> Female film directors may have been a very rare breed in mid-20th century Thailand, but female versionists abound. Compared to women in proximate artistic professions that were within reach among plebeian female talents, such as film actresses or singers in the emergent genre of popular modern music, the female versionists would probably have had the most intensely nomadic lifestyle, given the frequency and duration of each film performance tour on peripheral itinerant circuits. They would have been unusually well-travelled, at least domestically, compared to the majority of women in the country. The trajectories of their wanderings to small towns, remote villages and borderlands suggest a parallel modality of transitory cinematic experience with the theoretical model of urban *flânerie* influentially theorised by feminist film historians such as Giuliana Bruno. In her work on female film authorship and spectatorship at the turn of 20th-century Naples, Bruno theorises the connection between the urban arcades, female experiences of mobility and visibility in public spaces in the metropolis, and modes of nomadic looking cultivated both by early cinema and the commodified surfaces of the modern city.<sup>47</sup> Here, motifs of transiting, passaging and traversing encapsulate the bodily pleasures and desires characterising

<sup>46</sup> See also May Adadol Ingwanij, "Figures of Plebeian Modernity: Film Projection as Performance in Siam/Thailand", *SEAP Bulletin* – Fall (2014), 10–6, <http://seap.einaudi.cornell.edu/sites/seap/files/SEAP%20Bulletin-DEC-WEB%20VERSION.pdf> [accessed 24 Oct. 2017].

<sup>47</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 35–57.

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cinematic experience.<sup>48</sup> Of course, an obvious difference between this model of the female spectator and cineaste as “streetwalker” and the nomadic female versionist lies in the former’s metropolitan territory of *flânerie* and the expanded geography of wandering of the latter across variegated terrains. Yet what resonates is the association of the transitory, and within that the transgressive potential of coming into contact with hitherto distanced spaces and bodies, with female experiences of cinematic encounters.

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Third, while the idea of the transitory underscoring Bruno’s interweaving of urban mobility and embodied cinematic experiences emphasises spatial desires, the durational expansiveness of itinerant cinematic practices draws attention to the temporal thickness of mobility. Implicated in itinerant cinema’s expanded and enchanted temporality are sensations of passing or transiting into, or of immersion in and interfacing with, overlapping temporal-spatial dimensions, and of the body’s susceptibility to intensities of temporal rhythms.

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### <h1> Profaning Artistic Transmission

The motif of transit also applies to another dimension of cinematic performance concerning the status of versionists as figures intersecting traditional and modern arts. Here, transiting signals a certain fluidity of practices of artistic transmission that mid-20<sup>th</sup> century versionists brought into play through their informal pedagogical endeavours. Many performers who took up the profession between the 1950s and 1970s learnt this unusual art as talented self-taught mimics. They learnt by stealth, from going to film performances to immerse themselves in the styles of those famous or experienced versionists they particularly admired. Rather than receiving institutionalised training, either within the traditional unit of the performance troupe or the modern unit of the performing arts school, most versionists started out as watchful amateurs and accumulated experience through trial and error by performing on the bottom rung of peripheral exhibition circuits. Nevertheless, in speaking about their artistry, it is striking to note that many of them align their art under the sign of the traditional by signalling their connectedness to an artistic-pedagogical lineage.

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The art historical significance of versioning, as practice and discourse, might in this sense be understood, in a counterintuitive manner, in terms of its profaning of the embodied

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 56–7.

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practice of transmission and pedagogical epistemology of traditional Thai performing art. Helpful for grasping this dynamic is Deborah Wong's ethnomusicological study of *wai khru*, a foundational ritual in teaching and learning traditional dance and music. This is a ritual of artistic transmission connecting the student/disciple to the lineage of artistic power and knowledge personified by the teacher/master. In her book, Wong observes the centrality of the trope of the journey in traditional artistic pedagogy and epistemology in Thailand.<sup>49</sup> As she points out, the Thai language has a wide range of words that associates the act of learning, and the accruing of knowledge through embodied practice, with metaphors, idioms and verbs of travelling, wandering and voyaging. *Thau pleng*, an idiom meaning to teach a student a musical piece, which has roots in traditional music instruction, literally translates as "to "add on" a piece to the student."<sup>50</sup> As with the *wai khru* ritual, this idiom visually embodies the artistic pedagogical model of the relationship between the student/disciple and the teacher/master. The student/disciple receives knowledge from the teacher, when the latter personifies the presence of the first teacher or the originator of a particular lineage of artistic knowledge. The transmission of that esoteric, embodied, and sometimes dangerous knowledge occurs through the *wai khru* ritual and through practices of imitation and repetition in daily teaching.

Durational form, spatial alignment, object installation, sound and gesture make up the ritual for transmitting artistic lineage and power. The *wai khru* event involves an ensemble of activities including installing an altar of sacred objects, making food offerings, playing sacred music and/or performing sacred dances, and performing a series of gestures by the officiant and participants. The former needs to be a figure of authority who has direct artistic or familial kinship to the first/master-teacher of that art or 'line' of artistic knowledge. As a ritual *wai khru* enacts the invitation and the celestial arrival of the ancestral teacher, personified by and embodied in the officiant. In this duration, the first/ancestral teacher blesses the students with certain physical gestures and haptic contact with the head of the students, and within this duration extends artistic lineage to them.<sup>51</sup> Premised on affirming and extending lineage, this ritual of artistic transmission has been a powerful force of institutional practice for conservative cultural politics and the nationalistic encompassment of the arts. Yet,

<sup>49</sup> Deborah Wong, *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. chapters 2 and 4

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significantly, this traditional epistemology of artistic transmission has also been mobilised in non-institutional or interstitial practices, among practices that ambiguously straddle institutional and non-institutional locales of art. It is in this sense that the blurring of the distinction between sacralisation and profanation comes into play around the *wai khru* ritual and its associated epistemology and phenomenology of transmission. Non-institutional agencies have performative scope to align themselves into and along a lineage of artistic transmission. The performative act, in this case, at once sacralises the adopted first teacher and profanes the epistemology and ritual of transmission by bringing them into common or non/alter-institutional use. This ambiguity is of critical relevance to conceptualising the art historical import of versioning as part of itinerant makeshift cinema.

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**Fig 7 file name Thid Khiew. Caption: An altar arranged for the First Teacher of versioning, Thid Khiew, at an annual *wai khru* ritual organised to pay respect to him by retired Southern versionists. This photograph was taken on 19 March 2011. Acknowledgement: Nujaree Jaikeng.**

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Thid Khiew aka Sin Sribunruang (1893–1948) was a showman, early film exhibitor, theatre troupe entrepreneur, editor of the first film magazine in Siam, and son of a Chinese newspaper owner who was Sun Yat Sen’s major ally in Bangkok at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is respectfully upheld by many retired versionists as the pioneer and first-teacher of their performing art.<sup>52</sup> When interviewed, Amara Yuthana, a retired female southern versionist of the same generation as Sriwan, honours his memory by describing Siam/Thailand’s first star versionist as like a second father to her, because it was to him that she owed her own successful livelihood as a versionist. To highlight the sacred significance of Thid Khiew for versionists of her generation, Amara says that she has an image of him hanging on the wall in the room in her house with the Buddha worship altar. To this day, at night when saying her prayers before sleeping she would make the gesture of *wai* (paying respect to a person of seniority or a higher being) to Thid Khiew. She recalls that when she was an active versionist, some cinema theatres in the southern circuit that she was working in would have a portrait of Thid Khiew in the audio booth built for versioning next to the projection booth. She would routinely *wai* Thid Khiew before speaking into the microphone

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<sup>52</sup> Dome Sukvong has written an article on Thid Khiew’s biography. See “*Thid Khiew kap loke banterng thai*” [Thid Khiew and the Thai Entertainment World], in *Manut pralaad chat thai nai Thong Kham*, Muang Boran (1983), pp. 133–64.

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to start a performance.<sup>53</sup> In doing so, Amara situates herself as a disciple and artistic descendant of Thid Khiew, and, in her description, upholds him as the first teacher of her artistic profession. It is significant, though, to note that her activation of this traditional trope of artistic lineage has little direct connection with her pedagogical route into the art. Amara neither studied with Thid Khiew himself nor with versionists who had been taught by him. She started out in the early 1950s when she was a teenager in the southern province of Trang. Her father had left the military and had found work in one of the cinemas. Her mother ran a restaurant nearby frequented by versionists, where she helped out, having left school at an early age. A versionist had been in the army with her father, and had heard her singing in the restaurant. He liked her voice and secured her parents' agreement to employ her as part of the itinerant troupe he was with. Initially, her job was to sing a few songs before the start of film performances. Then she graduated to performing female voices for the films, which she learnt by imitating the female vocal impersonation of the male versionist who had brought her into the troupe.

The transmission of knowledge through imitating the master-teacher is a central feature of traditional artistic learning. What is significant to note in the case of film versioning is the ambiguity of pedagogical agency licensed by the peculiar combination of the live appeal of the performance mode and film's mechanical reproducibility. In her interview, retired versionist Panida Boonyarat who used to work in exhibition circuits in the satellite provinces surrounding Bangkok, as well as the north and northeast regions, points to the cinema theatre as her site of learning.<sup>54</sup> Versionists on peripheral circuits such as herself would attend film vocalisation performances by star versionists, taking place in prestigious cinemas in Bangkok or in large provincial centres, in order to immerse themselves in the vocalising and enunciating styles of the stars, in effect treating these performances as manuals.<sup>55</sup> Panida, who began versioning in the late 1950s, remembers going to Chaloem Krung cinema in Bangkok to study the performances of certain films by the biggest female star versionists, Marasri Isarangkul na Ayutthaya and Juree Osiri. During their performances, peripheral circuit versionists like her would sit in the auditorium. Interestingly, she says that out of courtesy she

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Amara by Nuchjaree Jaikeng, 19 Mar. 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Panida Boonyarat by Chanchana Homsap, 8 May 2012.

<sup>55</sup> See Craig Reynolds's discussion of "manual knowledge" as the basis of Thai epistemology, in Craig J. Reynolds, "A Thai Manual Knowledge: Theory and Practice", in *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 214–42.

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would greet and *wai* the vocal stars at the cinema before their performances, and let them know that she had come to “practice”. Once the film reels had done the rounds at these cinemas in the first- or second-run circuits, and were then sold onto distributors and exhibitors running peripheral cinema theatres in small towns and provinces or servicing itinerant circuits, then the versionists on the lower rung of the hierarchy would style their performances by reproducing or adapting from their “manual” of performances attended. In a similar manner, Pariphan Watcharanon, who made his name as a voice performer for Chinese films in the 1980s and is now a successful owner of a sound recording and dubbing studio in Bangkok as well as a director of a teen comedy, recounts in his interview that he got into versioning as a film crazed youth growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Hat Yai, an important commercial city in the south situated in Songkhla province.<sup>56</sup> He says that he had always known he wanted to be a versionist, despite his family’s ambition for their children to enter higher education and become a white-collar professional middle-class. In his youth, he would sneak into cinema theatres to study the performances of his favourite versionists, and was particularly enamoured with the laconic style of famed southern male versionist Kannikar.

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These examples speak of an opening created by the proliferation of film exhibition tools and circuits in the mid-20th century period to profane, rather than disrupt, traditional practices of institutionalising artistic pedagogy and transmission. Although many versionists active in the mid-20th century recognise themselves as traditional performing artists, this performance art was never formally part of an institutional mode of practice whereby “lines” of artistic transmission, traceable to certain masters or first-teachers, were routinely upheld through initiation rituals. At the same time, the artistic status of versionists was not upheld through the mode of institutionalisation of modern performing art either. There has never existed a formal art educational institution or a curriculum to teach versioning. In terms of their training, most versionists did not submit themselves to a master-disciple relationship with a personified artistic authority. Yet through profanation of the practice and ritual of artistic transmission, which is at the same time an inverse movement of sacralisation, they have nevertheless been fictionalising their own artistic lineage. Their tracing a connective line through time back to Thid Khiew, as the originary master figure of their artistic profession, is

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Pariphan Watcharanon by May Adadol Ingawani and Nuchajree Jaikeng, 2 May 2011.

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a performative utterance that affirms a line of artistic transmission while simultaneously inventing that lineage through claiming faithful disciple status.

## <h1> Conceptualising Animistic Cinematic Practice

By way of a conclusion, I return to the broader aim of the article to function as a note towards conceptualising animistic cinematic practices. In film theory, animism tends to be used as a concept to draw attention to the liveliness of an animated constellation of things on the screen. In art history, animism is traditionally used as a term to associate premodern art practices and objects with ritual forms. Broadly speaking, these diverse disciplinary approaches have tended to approach the relationship between the animate and the inanimate, the visible and the invisible, by looking at the objects displayed, or at the still and moving figures enframed. In writing a portrait of itinerant makeshift cinema as a dispositive of cinematic encounters and experiences characterised by transitory yet primordially ambient spatiality, dilated and heterogeneous temporality, and intensity of contact and transmission between machines (non-human agents), locatable human bodies (human agents), and ambient non-human presence (undead, divine or spectral agents), this article is a preliminary proposal for another way of theorising the interfacing of animism, cast as a very old form of media, with cinema. It tries to identify the ground for doing so in a modality of cinema in and around Thailand during the Cold War period, not via a textual reading of visible figures and moving objects, but in relation to the contingent yet recursive arrangement of formal, spatial, technological, discursive and environmental elements that constitutes an intermedial and profane ensemble of cinematic practice. Animistic cinematic practice in this context would refer to extra-institutional or para-institutional moving-image practices constituted through the intertwining of technologically mobile cinematic apparatuses and exhibition conventions with traditional and indigenous practices of art as ritual and affective modes of mobilisation effecting the connecting between the human and the non-human, and the crossing of thresholds and boundaries between spaces, times and worlds.<sup>57</sup>

## <h1> BIOGRAPHY

**May Adadol Ingwanij** is Reader at the University of Westminster where she co-directs the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM). She is writing a book titled "Contemporary Art and Animistic Cinematic Practices in Southeast Asia". Her publications include "Exhibiting Lav Diaz's Long Films: Currencies of Circulation and Dialectics of Spectatorship" (2017); "Long Walk to Life: the Films of Lav Diaz" (2015); "Animism and the Performative Realist Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul" (2013); "Glimpses of Freedom: Independent

<sup>57</sup> My grateful thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed and incisive feedback, and for spirit of comradely generosity with which they made their comments.

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Cinema in Southeast Asia" (2012); "Nguyen Trinh Thi's Essay Films" (forthcoming). Her recent curatorial projects include Lav Diaz Journeys (London, 2017), On Attachments and Unknowns (Phnom Penh, 2017), Comparing Experimental Cinemas (Bangalore, 2014).

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