

CHAPTER III

COMMERCIAL IMAGES OF BORDERLANDS

The precedent chapter has outlined the predominant forces in the fields of the Thai film industry and emerging trends of digital formats in the sectors production, distribution and exhibition. It has shown that 'pure art' productions are hindered to enter the national film industry in Thailand. Innovative forces in Thailand largely depend on transnational capital for their productions, and add high value to their films through transnational cannels of consecration. At the same time, this independence from the national field allows the producers to not adhere to the narratives and norms of the dominant industry.

In this chapter, practices of representation are studied through historical comparison with the critical films genres produced in the 1970's and 1980's by the industry and independent filmmakers. This serves to identify how the northern borderlands have been represented in the past. By then studying recent commercial film productions of the Thai film industry, from 2003-2006, and identifying contemporary symbols of representing the region, distinct patterns might be established.

The last section in this chapter compares two distinctly different films about the borderlands. Based on the findings in the previous chapter, which show how symbolic capital is added to independent films through intervention of transnational capital, the effects on the content of such a production is studied in this chapter. Does *Blissfully Yours* differ from predominant representations - especially its contemporary *The Legend of King Naresuan*? Which are the symbols and signifiers used? Who made the decision over the film's storyline, form and style?

3.1 Film for Life 1970 - 1980's

This paragraph gives a general overview over trajectories of narratives in Thai films in the mid 1970's to 80's. This timeframe seems appropriate for two reasons: Thai film productions of approx. 130 films produced annually in 1957-1970, rose after the 1976 coup d'état which overthrew the Democrat PM, Seni Pramoj. The new Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien, introduced an import tax on feature films*, which led, during the two of the four years it was implemented (1977-1979), to a boycott by The Motion Picture Association of America and helped trigger a higher national output in Thailand to ca. 160 films annually. Up until then 50-60% of all films screened had been imported US films according to Boonrak Boonyaketmala (2006). The current tax rate seems to apply since the mid 1990's:

“In 1995, the first year of a negotiated trade issue between the United States and Thailand, duty on imported processed feature film was reduced to ten Baht per meter. Hollywood movie share of the Thai market grew to 60%, 80% in 1997.”
(Rosenberg 2004)

Although not in the same scope, film production has risen again since the late 1990's in Thailand. It is therefore interesting to compare the diversity of imagery in these two timeframes. The second reason is that the wave of new film directors at the time was paralleled by a movement of social activism. As a study by Hyunjung Yoon (2003) of 'Thai Films Made In The 1970's As Social Commentary On Migration Related Social Issues' shows, the *nang pua chiwit* genre, which she interprets as “modern realist films” included new subjects and addressed social issues in the 1970's. Hyunjung explains that *nang pua chiwit* literally means ‘films for life’, but can be interpreted as ‘socially engaged films’ (2003: 48, 51), a sub-genre of social realist films. Films of this sub-genre are studied in the following with a focus on their representation of borderlands. Their relevance derives from the fact that predominant storylines in Thai movies of the 1950's and 1960's had been melodramas with a romantic theme or

adventures based on popular novels. The Thai film industry's current formula of including a popular star casting in films was generated in the 1960's with Mitr Chaibancha and Pechara Chaowarat starring in many films produced at that time. Mitr Chaibancha dominated the action movie genre of the 1960's, which film director Wisit Sasieng claims were known (contemptuously) as '*raberd poa, khao pao kratom*', 'bomb the mountain, burn the huts' movies (Wild about Movies n.d.). Hyunjung writes that the 'films for life' were developed "under the direction of Western-trained professionals" (2003: 46), but she does not elaborate the point further. One of the most productive of the 'socially engaged' directors was M.C Chatri Chalerm Yukol, who studied cinematography in the U.S. His debut film was about extraterrestrials landing in a primitive village (*Man Ma Kap Khwam Mud*, 1971). His second film, *Khao Chu Kan* (Dr. Karn, 1973), was reportedly almost banned as it addressed issues of corruption in the civil service and police. Of the approximately 30 socially critical films of the 1970's revised by Hyunjung, almost a quarter were made by this director, who is a member of the royal Thai family. His films' subjects included prostitution, rural-urban migration and crime in Bangkok, but also comments on the Cold War: In *Phom Mai Yak Pen Phantho* (I Didn't Want To Be A Lieutenant, 1975), M.C. Chatri Chalerm Yukol develops the story of a Thai secret agent of the government in the jungle of Northern Thailand. "This film sets up the communists as evil villains who need to be stopped for the sake of peace", writes Yoon (2003: 53). The Prince has continued through the 1980's making films commenting on social issues of a large variety of topics including the story of elephant keeper Boonsong and his exploitation of the forest (1987), the fight for civil rights by poor marginalised urban communities (1986)¹, the negative effects of traditional life in comparison with the facility of life with modern technology (1990), drug use, addiction and HIV/AIDS (1994, 1996), as well as migration and boat-people on the Chao Phraya (1995, 1996). The quantity of films produced by M.C. Chatri Chalerm Yukol in the 1970's and 80's can be attributed to the fact that the number of films produced rose generally due to the government policy of raised taxes of imported films. It also demonstrates his position in the struggles of the time. Boonrak (2006) even

¹ *Kru Somsri* (Teacher Somsri, 1986), *Khon Liang Chang* (The Elephant Keeper, 1990), *Nong Mia* (Sister-in-law, 1990), *Siasai 1, 2* (1995, 1996)

attributes him what he calls a new wave of “the struggle of little people against the system” films.

Some of the film directors of the 1970's and 80's had actually been imprisoned (like Wichit Kounavudhi, a former journalist). His 1982 *Luk Isaan* (Child of the Northeast) is probably one of the most frequently cited films of this period. It shows the devastation of droughts in a small rural town, Koak-e-leaw, in the Northeast of Thailand, where villagers struggle to survive. The cast is made up of non-professional actors to be as close to reality as a fiction film can be. In an interview the director's son, Knit Kounavudhi, who worked on many of the productions as editor, explains how his father insisted on certain political messages in his films, even when the four hour master version of *Luk Isaan* had to be shortened to two hours (ibid: 134-140). Among the action and romances which otherwise predominated, the film stuck out as it was an expression mirroring the harsh natural environment of the region leaves people on the edge of starvation. Five years after *Luk Isaan*, another semi documentary about the area was released, *The Seed*. It, too, tells of farmers being hit by droughts, yet, they are saved by royally funded cloud seeding operations. Other films of that period ‘representing’ ‘Isaan people’ tell of the poor status of women driven into prostitution or their being looked down upon as such during the war against Vietnam (*21 Theptida Bar 21*, 1978 and *Her Name is Boonrawd*, 1984), labour migration (*Thongpoon Khoke Pho*, 1977; *Prachachon Nok*, 1981), impoverished life in the countryside and the need for education (teacher Phia in Isaan, and *Khru Baan Nok* - both 1978). วิจิตร คุณาวุฒิ (Wichit Konavudhi) also directed *Khon Phu Kao* (Mountain People, 1979). Described as an adventure tale of a young hill tribe couple, the film included a documentary-style introduction of various ethnic groups in northern Thailand. “It is about life of a highlander. Chased from his village, it narrates his struggling life. The movie shows hilltribes life (Yao, Akha, Lao), customs and animist beliefs. It also shows the way that Thai people treat them “cheating them, corrupting them by selling them goods they don't need, and encouraging them to produce opium” (Thai Drama Movies n.d.). While his was an exceptional film, prostitution was a recurrent topic in the films covering ‘the North’, and featured rural mothers sending their daughters to become prostitutes in Bangkok in order to be able to pay off family debts: *Theptida Rongraem* (1974); *Golden Triangle* (1980) starring Sombat Methanee as well as *Mue Puen* (The Gunman,

1983). With filmmaking technology not as convenient as today, only a few film industry independent films were made at the time. Chalida Uabumrungjit, founder of the Thai Film Foundation, contends that only a few *critical* films were actually made during that period. Besides *Assajeree* (Exclamation (!)), a film by Suraphong Pinitkar (1976), she notes Jon Ungpakorn's *Karn Tor Su Khong Kammakorn Rong-ngan Hara* (Hara Factory Workers Struggle, 1975), *Tongpan* (1975)² and *Prachachon Nok* (On The Fringe of Society, 1981), which was only one of the films the Catholic Council of Thailand for Development produced under the heading 'Isaarn Group' the time. Interestingly, she also mentions that Suraphong's film entered a documentary film competition organised by the Bank of Bangkok a year after its release, and that the third and fourth prizes were a Thai-US co-production film, and produced with the support of the Catholic Commission for Human Development respectively. The fact that 'genuinely critical' films were externally funded is also pointed to by Boonrak (2006). In his account of the globalisation of Thai film history, he notes only three more socially critical films in the 1990s, and claims that *Just Games* by Kamron Kunadilok, "the first Thai pro-democracy film supported by a foreign power", was funded by the British Channel 4.

Indeed, this brief overview suggests that trajectories of distinctly *different* films seem to have largely depended on external financial aid. Also, the diversity of genres and the quantity of films with a socio-political focus addressing challenges facing marginalised people is unique to this period of the commercial Thai film industry. Led by a member of the Royal Thai Government, at least in quantity, the '*nang pua chiwit*' period demonstrates that films were used as a powerful medium contributing to raising public awareness, as well as offering, if fictional, solutions to especially ethical and moral norms of behaviour. The signifiers of the films in this genre refer to the challenges of unequal development: Isaan people as rural-urban migrants, particularly women from the Northern borderlands as prostitutes, ethnic and marginalised people as people who adhere to traditional values and Thai intellectuals and activists who help reduce poverty and promote justice. At a time when "...many formal... leaders were killed by the

² Hyunjung lists the film's release as dating to 1977. The film was banned on its initial release

government... everything was about communist... nobody could call for justice... total injustice at the time..." (a renowned filmmaker of the time, in: Yoon, 2003: 145).

3.2 Signifiers of northern borderlands (2003 -2006)

Of the five commercial films censored from 2003-2006, three concerned the borderlands, one was a satirical film about former P.M. Thaksin Shinawatra's son (*Voke Vark* 2004) and *Koy Ter Yuem* (See How They Run, 2006) is a film about the Buddhist Sangha in Thailand. Both films were released by GMM. Reportedly, *Voke Vark* was not censored because of a complaint by the Shinawatra family, but upon decision of the Census Board of Thailand, while The Council of the Buddhist Organisations of Thailand officially submitted a letter to the National Police Bureau demanding that parts of comedy *Koy Ter Yuem* be changed, citing the inappropriate title and scenes that insult the image of monks. The borderland films were *Born To Fight* (2004), produced by Sahamongkolfilm, which is the story of a murder during a drug bust on the Thai-Burmese border and the other two were censored after the governments of Cambodia and Laos respectively filed complaints against *Laa Tha Phee* (Ghost Game) and *Mak Te* (Lucky Loser). The films were both released in 2006 by GMM (TIFA and GTH). Pantham Thongsang, the producer of *Ghost Game*, a reality-TV style feature film, had to apologise in public because the 'Cambodian former-prison-turned-museum', in which eleven participants of the reality-TV game were locked up, was too realistic an image of the former Khmer Rouge's prison. The cultural production of films and their innate symbolic and social value is thus officially recognised. Regulation is not merely a question of economic capital, but powerful socio-political agents contest the further channelling of films which they deem harmful for their image. The power of regulation is not evenly spread, however. While the symbolic power legitimising or criticising the Cambodian past can not simply be appropriated by a Thai producer, *The Legend of King Naresuan* is uncontested in the official political sphere, and indicates complex power relations in the region.

In commercial films produced from 2003 – 2006, the North of Thailand was represented in the following genres: three romances (*The Letter*, 2004; *Dear Dakanda*

2005 and *The Memory*, 2006), an adventure (*Nanacha: Wild Child*, 2005), a documentary (*Dek-Toh* 2005), an animation (*Khan Kluay*, 2006), a teen-flick (*Oops! There's Dad* 2005), a horror movie *Lizard Woman* (2004) and two action films (*Scared* 2005 and *Born To Fight*, 2004). Two of these films, i.e. not even one percent of the commercial productions, cast 'ethnic people': *Nanachai: Wild Child* and *The Memory*. In these films, the following images are established of ethnic people in the North: As the title of the *Nanacha* suggests, the 'hill-tribe boy' is rowdy and sent out of the village to correct his behaviour in an international school. The school does not signify a higher level of education, however, but turns out to be the source of a different kind of wildness. *Dek-Toh*, which was released in the same year but was independently funded, also documents education in the North. In contrast to *Nanachai*, it is about a Thai school run in parts by the Border Patrol Police in which children of the ethnic community enrol. That two films released in the same year emphasise the need for educational institutions is significant by itself. Yet, the messages implied both point to a definition of Thai identity rather than ethnic identity. In *Nanachai* the point of reference is an international school, questioning its reputation and thus links Thai and ethnic communities. *Dek-Toh* makes a similar point in showing the hardships of Thai educators persisting to help ethnic minority community children. (In fact, there is nothing ethnic about the children in the film, besides scenes in the beginning which show a family farming its land.) In this way, the northern borderlands have come into representation, but are depicted as unlearned, poor people and without a particular culture.

The Memory also casts 'ethnic people' from the northern borderlands. Although in minor roles, three 'ethnic minority people' (a man with his two wives) significantly contribute to the plot of the story: They save the main actor and real-life super-star, Film, after his car accident when he tried to escape a paparazzi, the beautiful Jaa. Their hospitality and care are invaluable, and, when the local hospital can do little for Film, who is lying in a coma, the concoction of herbal medicine provided by the male ethnic character brings the Bangkok star back to consciousness. The scene of the life-saving herbal medicine mixed in 'secrecy' is very short, and rather miraculous than pointing to indigenous knowledge of herbal medicine, but it is a statement about the hospital and the value of herbal medicine. On the other hand, the two ethnic women are shown as

‘traditional’ with black teeth, and particular hair-does, in ethnic dress. They are depicted as naïve and friendly throughout the film, although an inexplicable fast-motion clip at the end shows them as wild, sex-hungry creatures. (The husband runs in and out of a hut, looks into his pants to return inside where his other wife is waiting. Back and forth, his wives, giggling, take turns running in and out ... as does he – increasingly tired.) Polygamy as practiced by ethnic people in this film is added to the ‘happy end’ of a dramatic romance between two Thai people. The brief scene seems disconnected from the main narrative concerning Film and Jaa. It could signify similarity or difference, i.e. Film changes his mind again about Jaa or has another girl friend. The framing of this last sequence which refers to sexual practices is otherwise a sensitive topic in Thai films as censorship of *Syndromes and a Century* (not released in Thailand) indicates. The power to legitimise the symbolic of appropriate or inappropriate ethical codes and behaviour is a much contested issue, and the argument against it holds that it is hypocritical of the Thai Film Board to do so. The fact that two more romances are set in the North in which a younger generation escapes the moral standards set by parents at home in Bangkok seems a coincidence, but could also be seen as an extension of the imagery of the 1970’s -1980’s.

Other commercially produced films of the North depict the region as a space of wilderness and violence. *Saving Private Tootsie* (2001), which strictly speaking does not fall into the period under research, is a highly complex story involving the Royal Thai Army, the Burmese junta and local freedom fighters. Havoc and violence sometimes also involves foreigners as in the abovementioned *Born To Fight*. The Thai-Burmese border is a highly contested field of representation, over which two recently released films claim power: *The Legend of King Naresuan* (2007) and its animated twin sibling *Khan Kluay* (2006), which tells the same story of historical warfare in the borderlands from the point of view of King Naresuan’s legendary elephant. *Khan Kluay* is “King Naresuan’s royal elephant whose back has the elegant curve of a banana branch (or *khan kluay*)” (Aui, 2006). The 3D animation, which was released almost contemporarily with *The Legend of King Naresuan* has been criticised for its blatant jingoism. *Khan Kluay* conveys the message that the satanic, mammoth-like Burmese elephant has to be killed “and we’re told that in war, even animals have no choice but to kill for their countries” (ibid.).

The comparison, commercial films set in the Northeast are using different narratives for their representation of Isaan After block-buster hits *Mekhong Full Moon Party* (2002) and *Ong Bak: Muay Thai Warrior* (2003) – released by the two leading forces in the Thai film industry, smaller production houses are following the pattern in the hope to capitalise on the successful idea of depicting Isaan as a place, where ‘traditional’ values are still in use. Sahamongkolfilm’s *Ong Bak*, in particular, uses the story of a man who heroically retrieves the head of a stolen Buddha statue using his Muay Thai skills to draw an image of marauding ethical values in the city of Bangkok, where the ring of smugglers is based. In fact, the band of criminals consists of Thai and non Thai criminals based in Kao San Road, the infamous street catering for a certain group of independent international tourists, fake passports and drugs. Whereas the village in the Northeast, Baan Nong Pradu, is depicted as poor with villagers still adhering to ‘traditional’ values and the community spirit not yet destroyed. The films’ overwhelming success in Europe and the US, I argue, is linked to the fact that its narrative takes into account transnational tourism passing through Thailand’s metropolis, and specifically caters for that section of the transnational audience. In *Mekhong Full Moon Party*, too, it is the pressure of national and international tourism, ‘modern science’ and the media, which exert pressure on ‘traditional’ *bung fai phaya nak* (Naga fireballs) emerging from the Mekong River on the occasion of celebrating the end of Buddhist lent. Even though without direct reference, it is perhaps the films’ ambiguity and not taking sides in the struggle between ‘traditional authorities’ and ‘modernity’, which mirrors the ‘indy’ spirit. Central figures of the film are members of the Buddhist Sangha, who have invented the Laos-Thai border tradition of *bung fai* by turning their remote monastery into a chemical factory to produce the fireballs. They justify the fake miracle as a meritorious deed and part of their duty to worship Buddha and serve the community. The invented tradition is challenged with Khan’s return to the village from Bangkok. Challenged by every thinkable power from scientists, local and Bangkok based influential authorities, international tourism and the media, the tradition survives, although the sole person, the abbot of the monastery, who knows the secret of their production and location in the river dies in the film. The reasoning in the film is telling since the young local scientist, who slowly discovers the truth, equally thinks the

continuity of such a 'false' spectacle to be important given the significant economic gain for the village.

In comparison of the most financially successful films representing northern borderlands in recent years, the Northeast is integrated and a substantial part of Thailand, whereas ethnic people inhabiting the North are underrepresented, almost inexistent. The Northeast is given attention and its people are designated various roles ranging from comic entertainment to heroism through shared religious practices and moral values of national heritage. Such films even allow for narration in Isaan dialect and extensive use of local music. However exaggerated for comical effects, it does acknowledge an identity. A right which is not granted the diverse peoples from the Northern borderlands.

3.3 Tradition and Globalisation

As has been noted by close observers of Thai cinema (Hamilton a1993, b1993, Anchalee Chaiworaporn (n.d.), Rosenberg 2004, Harrison 2005), Cherd Songsri's 1970's slogan "We will promote Thai to the World" (Harrison 2005: 324) has been picked up by recent directors and production houses of the Thai film industry. An increasing number of historic epics are currently marketed in Thailand and globally (*The Legend of Suriyothai* (2000), *Bang Rajan* (2000), *Killer Tattoo* (2001), *Khan Kluiy* (2006), *The Legend of King Naresuan* (2007) among others), and a variety of national retrospectives seem to be characterising Thai film productions (*Daeng Birley and the Young Gangsters* (1997), *Nang Naak* (1999)). What Anchalee (n.d.) calls the 'Two Conflicting Identities in New Thai Cinema' translates into a preoccupation of commercial Thai films on national 'tradition' and more general nostalgic narratives. Anchalee argues that *nang yon a-dee* ("looking back" cinema) or *nang yon yuk* ("returning to the past" movies) are in line with general national guidelines promoting *khuen soo raak kwam pen thai* ("going back to basics" or "going back to Thai roots"). Such films, she puts forth, are in part a response to the current rapid economic changes, i.e. globalization, and a lesson learnt from the 1997 financial crash. Retrospectives are deemed to have an educational effect and calling to attention values of a simpler, less materialistic life-style invoked in 1997 by a speech by H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej promoting greater self-sufficiency. As Anchalee's article turns out, the boundaries of 'traditional Thai' values-confirming film genres and the more jingoistic ones are not always clear: "How come that more than half of Thai cinema in the past three years [2000 – 2002] come to be about Thai *history*?" (*my emphasis and addition*).

Case study of distinction

Hamilton's argues, that the monopoly established by certain parts of the film industry over legitimate representation is challenged during processes of globalization. She has published articles on the dilemmas of representation in Thai cinema, the media and issues of censorship (a1993, b1993) before the 1997 financial crisis, but some of her observations seem equally valid today. Effectively, globalisation of trajectories of films in the 'independent' field is creating a distinct juxtaposition of imagery's symbolic power over representational modes. A suitable example, are two recent Thai films showing divergent positions concerning the historically controversial Northern borderlands.

King Naresuan (2007), directed by M.C. Chatri Chalerm Yukol, is the most expensive Thai motion picture movie produced in Thai film history with a cast of Thousands (literally 100,000 army recruits as extras, horses imported from Australia trained for movie stunts and martial arts demonstrations). The outdoor warfare and indoor scenes occupy 800 acres of land on a military base in Kanchanaburi Province, on the border between Thailand and Burma, where movie sets representing the voluptuous wealth of Pegu as well as Ayutthya in the 16th century and include royal palaces, temples, forts, bazaars and, marginally, a slum were built for the royal epic. The production house, Prommitr International Productions, is owned by the films' director and his wife Mom Kalma Yukol Na Ayudhaya Kunakorn Sethi, the official producer of the film. Interpreted as being a major signal intending to promote Thailand as the central destination for film productions in Southeast Asia, the film has also been promoted nation-wide in the manner of *Suriyothai* with various promotion activities covered by main broadcasting media and billboard advertisement, the sale of making-of DVDs, T-Shirts, booklets and other accessories in major chain stores throughout the country. It is also promoted on the global market (during the Cannes Film Festival 2006, for example). The exclusive launch of part 1 of *King Naresuan* in all major cinemas in Bangkok on January 18th 2007 aborted even the Bangkok International Film Festival, highly valued by the TAT as an event promoting transnational tourism. Although delayed, the world-wide premiere of *King Naresuan* was held on the day of

the decisive battle in which King Bayinnaung's son was defeated by the Siamese King³. Its production furthermore coincided with celebrations of the 60th anniversary of his ascension to the throne in honour of H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej. *King Naresuan* yielded Bt 120 million in the first four days of its screening, and until July 2007 this figure rose to Bt 487 million. *King Naresuan*'s copy in form of the 3D children's animation film about his elephant *Khan Kluay*, who stabbed to death its Burmese enemy, furthermore legitimises the Thai version of history. *King Naresuan*'s story and plot are based on the warfare between what constitutes Burma and Thailand today. Looming authenticity, its plot is based on the authoritative writings of a 19th century royal family member, whose accounts of the past are suggested to be as close as any Siamese eye-witness report of historical events can be. Text based references were translated for the film by a Burmese academic, whose nationality purportedly makes him or her representative of critical voices towards this Siamese historiography.

“When we're making a film based on history, we have to ask ourselves 'whose history?' In researching for Naresuan, I rely mainly on the account of Crown Prince Utumporn, who went to live in Burma 150 years after the time of King Naresuan. He interviewed a lot of people and wrote a historical chapter in Burmese. I had a Burmese professor translate it for me, and we cross-checked it with other versions of history.” (M.C. Chatree Chalerm Yukol, in Fernquest 2006)

King Naresuan, allegedly a close-to-real visual representation of the historical king's restoring of “independence, dignity and monarchy” celebrates “The Nation's Great King 400 years ago” (Chiang Mai Chiang Rai n.d). The film draws on historic accounts of intense warfare between ‘Burmese’ and ‘Siamese’ forces at the height of the early Toungoo Dynasty (1486-1597), which was characterised by growing centralisation of power (Pamaree 2006: 5). The film culminates in the story of King Naresuan's army's successful resistance against Burmese forces invading Ayutthya and the decisive battle at Nhong Sarai in contemporary Supanburi on January 18th 1593. Historians have

³ It was only recently discovered according to *Matichon* that the historical date was January 18 not January 25, and the Thai government consequently declared a change of Armed Forces Day (cited in the S.H.A.N. Herald No. 233)

noted the fact that the regions' realms of power, *mandala*, never overlapped until the first half of the 16th century, when the old Mon kingdom was incorporated in the Burmese political realm, and the interior capital Toungoo was abandoned for Pegu. According to Burma expert and historian Liebermann and Sunait Chutintaranond, the first Toungoo kings' main objective in attacking 'Upper Burma', 'Shan States' and Lanna – especially Chiang Mai in 1558 – and Ayutthaya in 1563-4, 1568-9 and 1580 (Liebermann 2003: 220-222; Pamaree 2006: 20) was to secure their economic stakes in the trans-peninsular trade with the Gulf of Siam. Later warfare strategies seem to have changed in that the focus was on key regions in the South on the Malay Peninsula as well as in the Northern borderland. In this way, Lännā and Lancang, strategically important areas in the North, were under Burmese tutelage (again) for “some time during the Konbaung Dynasty (1753-1886)” (Lieberman, 1978; Pamaree, 2006: 8). Perhaps more importantly, spheres of influence and reign continuously shifted (Tun Aung Chain, 2002) and revolts and fighting involved the resettlement of ruling family's and *muang* (centres of power) inhabitants – before and after the heroic battle. Until the early 19th century, rivalries continued in much the same pattern until the complex dynamics following the destruction of Muang Nan by the Burmese in 1789 would eventually lead to “the amalgamation of Nan with Siam” (Wyatt, 1966). The incident triggered the combining of forces from 'the South', i.e. Bangkok, Vientiane, Chiang Mai, Muang Nan, etc. – “all together the forces numbered 20,000 men” (*The Nan Chronicle*, Wyatt 1966: 58) – to invade Chiang Saen in 1802 AD. But it wasn't until 1804, under the leadership of Chao Atthawanon Pannyo (“the 7th ruler of Nan under Burmese rule and under the King of Siam for 22 years” [ibid.]) and with aid of Chiang Mai and Lampang forces that Chiang Saen was “razed to prevent reoccupation and its population was deported to Nan and Chiang Mai” (Luca Invernizzi Tettoni, *A Guide to Chiang Mai and Northern Thailand*, pp.50-51). Chao Atthawon Pannyo plays a significant role in this 'unification' as he turned against the King of Ava to serve the King of Siam, and in 1805, invaded cities in Xishuangbanna (today's Southwest China), Chiang Rung and Chiang Khaeng, who did not resist, “but surrendered without fighting and asked to be vassals of the King of Bangkok” (Wyatt 1966: 60). After Chao Atthawon's sudden death in Bangkok, his uncle was appointed by the new King and continued the series of invasions to Muang La and Muang Phong, Chiang Khaeng and

Muang Phuka from his base at Tachilek. Upon return to Nan in 1813 AD he brought with him 6000 war prisoners (ibid: 62). Little is known whom these people comprised of. In the entire episode of the film, no reference is made to the various peoples who would have been fighting in these wars besides an acknowledging nod towards the Mon.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the director of *Sud Sanaeha* (Blissfully Yours, 2003), does not make claims for his contemporary fiction film about the relationship of three people living in the northern borderlands. Albeit a romantic drama, the film's sequences filmed almost in real-time and its amateur actors – three main characters, to be precise – convey the sensation of a documentary. Even so, Apichatpong describes documentary as “a reflection of reality according to its maker. It is not the truth (and will never be), but it is a representation of the person behind it” (Chalida, 2001). *Blissfully Yours* is a low-budget film censored in Thailand to a 108 minutes, while MK2 (France) sells the uncensored version (127'). It is not a digital but an independent film. For his first feature length film *Mysterious Object at Noon*, director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, from Thailand's Northeast, relied on financial aid from his family, but was eventually granted funding from the Dutch Hubert Bals Fund. Since the film's international success, *Blissfully Yours*, his second fiction, was co-produced by Mingmongkol Sonakul (Firecracker Film Thailand), Eric Chan, a Taiwanese sponsor predominantly interested in artistic, experimental and challenging film genres, and Charles de Meaux (France). Charles de Meaux founded Anna Sanders Films in 1998 with Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, and the Association for Diffusion of Contemporary Art. Anna Sanders Films proposes to be a production tool for projects that are shaping new cinematic landscapes or, rather, the “moments in landscapes” (Strand Releasing, n.d.). “The Hubert Bals Fund is designed to bring ‘remarkable’ or ‘urgent’ feature films and feature-length ‘creative documentaries’ by innovative and talented filmmakers from developing countries closer to completion” (Int. Film Festival Rotterdam n.d.). Firecracker Film, the Thai production house, pursues the objective to develop methods of support outside of the established mechanisms. Co-founder of *Kick the Machine*, Apichatpong represents the interests of independent filmmakers in the Ministry of Culture's Contemporary Art Sector Office, and is a member of the Thai Independent Filmmakers Association (TIFA), a production arm of GMM Grammy's

GTH, which works with producers and allows them more freedom in their international co-productions – knowing that a transnational audience requires slightly differing narratives and styles. Apichatpong, who graduated in architecture from Khon Kaen University and the Art Institute of Chicago, has been working extensively with transnational capital especially co-operation partners from Europe for his short film and feature-length film projects. His films are well known outside of Thailand, but continue to be censored for release by the Thai Film Board (*Syndromes of A Century*, 2007). The director has successfully turned his image of an ‘independent’ filmmaker into a virtue and capital. Comparable to director Lars von Trier who made of it a dogma and through his creativity challenged conventional modes of filming techniques, aesthetic modes, ethic and moral taboos, and forms of cooperation with protagonists. Apichatpong’s films, which have been described as ‘hybrid documentaries’, are highly appreciated by global so called ‘art-house’ loving audiences. This style challenges conventional historical epics as it is turning the usual fact-fiction dichotomy upside down, although, strictly speaking both *King Naresuan* and *Blissfully Yours* are categorized as fiction, and both constitute of epic tales of Thai-Burmese relations - merely differing in the time frame set. *Blissfully Yours* is a contemporary story: Of Min, a Burmese migrant in Thailand, who is taken care of by two women: Roong, a young Thai girl and Orn, a middle-aged Thai woman who is paid to care for Min while Roong is at work. We witness Roong’s and Orn’s daily routine in real-time camera motion, which adds to the fiction’s feeling of lived experience. The narrative develops equally slowly, as it only eventually becomes clear why Min doesn’t speak during the lengthy hospital sequence while Roong and Orn try to convince the doctor to issue a health certificate for him, which he needs to find even an illegal job. Min also suffers from rashes, for which Orn prepares a traditional concoction of herbs to apply on his skin in addition to the modern Western medicine prescribed at the hospital. – The entire prologue, making up half of the film (shopping at the market, riding a motorbike, and arriving late for work in the factory, etc.), introduces us to the three main characters’ relationship and their daily environment in long steady shots resembling the cinema *réalité* style of the late 1960’s in France. Without a change of rhythm, the film’s latter half shifts from a lethargic atmosphere in the city to the natural environment of the borderland forest, and a secluded creek. The triangle of emotions which ensues evokes the audiences’

imagination as dialogues are reduced to a minimum and little other than the gurgling of the water can be heard on the soundtrack. The scenes of intimacy, which ensue, were censored and cut for the films' release in Thailand.

These two sample films constitute the extreme ends of the Thai filmscape. Their distinct difference is possible only through global channels of capital for production, distribution and exhibition. *King Naresuan*'s Hollywood style and budget, the pitching of the film on market like Cannes, and other media reporting on royal celebrations in Thailand, positions it to create a world-wide image of the origins of Thailand's 'independence'. Burma expert and historian Sunait Chutintaranond, who provided academic advice for the script of *King Naresuan*, explains:

"Eighty to Ninety percent of the films are made by people from outside the region. We don't have big movies explaining about our past or how we perceive of ourselves. We always have to look from an outside perspective, which doesn't fit our situation." (personal communication, 5 February 2007)

Referring to Hollywood's long-standing domination of box-offices in Thailand, and productions like *Anna and the King*, Sunait places *King Naresuan* as a national self-representation in the context of the global film industry. The film adopts a cultural stance that eulogizes 'Thai independence', comparable to others' national narratives, and firmly establishes 'Thai traditions' grounded in Buddhism, loyalty to the royal family, especially by the women, and details such as traditional forms of dance, etc. Its producers' particular socio-political, economic and cultural status furthermore adds to the narrated history's symbolic power, nationally and globally. Amporn claimed similar attributes for *Suriyothai*, and aptly writes of a "hegemonic national narrative" (2003: 296). In fact, production environments, narrative style and form of this film series do not differ much. *Suriyothai* is entirely sponsored by H.M. Queen Sirikit and also directed by M.C. Chatri Chalerm Yukol, who is quoted as saying "We are colonized by Hollywood movies, Chinese movies. We are losing our cultural identity" (2003: 299).

The inflationary value of signifiers, ostensibly representing, but in due course with the commodification of cultural production no longer representing a basic reality, is a

central notion of Baudrillard's of *simulacra*. In the context of globalisation, it is no less than the symbols of nation-ality, which are clashing. According to Baudrillard's scale of representational modes, the first stage is an ideological one, with good or bad representational practices, "the reflection of a basic reality" turning into the masking and perversion thereof (1995: 81). It then plays at being an appearance – "it is in the order of sorcery" "masking the absence of a basic reality" (ibid.). The last stage of his abstraction of social realities is a *simulacrum*, a 'hyper tradition'. The symbolism in *King Naresuan* can be placed in his scale, as 'Thailand's 'Battle of Independence' as told in the film, seems unrelated to a basic reality. Baudrillard perceived of this development of capital's trajectories and cultural value systems as the end of (French) history, and parallel discourses exist in globalisation theory. The phenomenon of *simulacra* or stages towards it, must, however, be seen in the context of power struggles. Baudrillard claimed that even institutions would turn into mere symbols and power would no longer reside in traditional institutions. *King Naresuan* represents the symbolic power of representation.

The film *Blissfully Yours* is positioned in much more complex global relations as the above enumeration of co-producers and distributors shows. Apichatpong's educational background predispositions him to contemporary art house circles, whose style differs from commercial artists'. Consequently, his film is void of metaphors alluding to history or visual references hinting at Thai-land or Burmese land. It is a distinctly different account of the area. He draws an image of three individual characters in a contemporary context. His deliberate non-structuring pushes the responsibility of interpretation, association and production of meaning towards the audience rather than giving ready-made answers. Apichatpong is at the opposite end of attempting to represent. But it is not the objective here, to point out 'good' or 'bad' representations. Apichatpong has said: "So Thailand is increasingly a 'mixing bowl' and consequently I don't think Thai film has a clear identity" (Williamson 2007). In other words, he is concerned about identity creation, but is not in the social position to narrate it in one way or another. Because he depends on transnational capital, critics hold that his style is entirely 'Western'. More significantly, he has been able to accumulate symbolic power

through transnational channels of production and distribution that his narratives and differing style of filmmaking is released in Thailand.

3.3 Summary

The most outstanding characteristic of the commercial films 2003 – 2006 representative of borderlands in this chapter is their seemingly systematic establishing identities through repetitious imagery. In general, contradictory metaphors of spirituality versus modernity, and capitalist vices against tradition prevail as storylines. In films about the Northeast traditional values are often projected onto people or places. In sharp contrast to the North, Isaan, although poor, is represented also as a place filled with comedy and music. In relationship to representations of urban environments, the Northeast is shown as a resort of spiritual tradition where heroes dwell and myths still hold true. Images of the North, instead, are places where young ‘modern’ youth find ‘amoral’ city life-styles to enjoy. The study of signifiers in commercial films about borderlands produced from 2003 – 2006 found that the imagery produced is preoccupied with two interrelated topics: historic nostalgia and the ‘threatening’ transformations of modernity/globalisation. The latter are signified by themes of urban based crime, foreign unwanted intervention, natural disasters), while the resort into an (ideal) past or allusions to the past are signified by themes of traditional ethics and moral value systems (Buddhism, spiritualism, benevolence, etc.). As noted, these are shared with the Northeast, but not the South or North. The actual casting or representation of ethnic people of northern Thailand in these films is very limited. The fact that two of the films were about children, whose identity as ‘ethnic’ was of minor importance in the respective environments of an international and a Thai school, does

seem indicative for their socio-political status in Thailand. *Nanachai* and *The Memory* were produced by CM Film and RS Plc respectively, and RS' *The Memory* adhered to the preferred standard of including a pop-star into a film production. In this way, their inclusion of an "ethnic cast" can not be seen as an innovation, since it is in RS' interest to promote their music productions or advertise the stars whose music they sell. This study of commercial films about borderlands found contemporary films misrepresenting or not representing peoples living in the North of Thailand.

Although themes were also recurring in the Films for Life period of Thai film history, when zero Hollywood films were imported, those films were more diverse. They differ from contemporary imagery, the uniformity of which is striking. Certainly, Films for Life were more inclusive of marginalised and under-privileged people. If not representing ethnic minority people on a large scale, this section of commercial films produced in the 1970's -1980's was often political, although some critics contend that they weren't radical enough. The suggestion that less global competition leads to higher diversity in the field of production seems verified, however limited. The borderline seems to have been reached with *Mountain People*, which was outright critical of some aspects of Thai policy. The film remained an exception, and openly critical films were sponsored with US or other external capital. All Films for Life seem more radically political than any of the commercially produced films in contemporary Thailand. During that time, this genre of film showed specific dilemmas and their storylines were social commentaries. Today, social issues like migration or prostitution might be part of a film's story, but as the previous chapter shows the only digital documentary film which had as its topic Isaan migrants, was required to include the obligatory pop-star. Generally, contemporary commercial Thai film productions about borderlands construct narratives not along a local reality, but in relationship to national and global environments.

Finally, the comparison of a commercial and an artistic film about the northern borderlands show distinct differences. They represent an imitation of Hollywood style filmmaking and European art-house style. This is not astonishing given their respective production houses: Promittr and Sahamongkol are combined the most powerful production/distribution conglomerate in Thailand. The audiences they cater for differ in

education and taste from those of *Kick The Machine*. With increasing globalisation, transnational investment in the film industry in Thailand, and transnational co-productions, the former's attempt to re-inscribe national history and legitimate power structures as a reaction to these transformations is expressed in the overall structure of the film *King Naresuan*, and in its nationwide marketing and exhibition strategy (three episodes to be released throughout the year 2007). The historical epic furthermore tries to convince in grandeur of location, total number of cast, costume, special effects, etc. Adhering to a US standard of Hollywood style is convenient for transnational audiences and for the direct marketing of the film on international film markets. Given that the film is self-financed, so to speak, the Royal Thai Government is funding its own film project, no negotiation processes are in the way but for the current political situation of Thai-Burmese relations. At least the first part of the film, released in January 2007, the depiction of the Burmese King Bayinnaung is not the villain expected. Mediated through a Mon monk, who raised Bayinnaung and later King Naresuan (and is still alive in part two), similarity of traditional Buddhist value systems hint at the symbolic value of the film as a tool for political mediation, while re-reinventing tradition, re-inscribing history and legitimating power structures. Although a slightly subtler version, *King Naresuan* and *Khan Kluay* – released almost contemporarily – are repeating each other's narrative. The animated blue elephant swimming in a lotus pond on the advertisement poster indeed bears no relation to any reality. In this way, these two films confirm the hypothesis that certain digital films are agents of hyper-tradition. Contrary to Baudrillard, however, this analysis asks who and how such hyper tradition is possible. Baudrillard, whose central focus was the perversion of representational systems, argued that power systems would become mere symbols, too. Provocatively, he even wrote a book *Forget Foucault*, who studies of institutions was making the opposite point. I argue that this is a reaction against global forces and transnational cultural flows to reconstruct a national Thai identity and legitimise the powers in place. This leaves no space for Others, and shows that the domination of imagery is concurrently the domination of power – from the economic to the symbolic. Hyper tradition as a mere degree of veracity of representation can explain phenomena, but unless their meaning is translated back, the naming of a phenomenon seems irrelevant. One possible interpretation has

been offered by Chen Kuan-Hsin, whose point of view from critical cultural studies analyses psychological decolonisation. He writes:

“In inventing and reinventing signs familiar to the popular imaginary and then articulating them as a higher form of universalism, the ex-colonized regains confidence in civilization, and thereby ‘at least’ beats the West in terms of cultural imagination.” (Chen 1998: 18)

Hamilton has described the struggle in the Thai film industry during the 1980’s and early 1990’s over how Thailand was to be represented: “[T]he Thai power elites’ concepts of the role of film derive directly from an attempt to assert and maintain a curious repressive-modernist control over the political/social consciousness of a society plunged headlong into a postmodernist global economy” (a 1993:142). Unless she disregards the institutions and agents of globalisation, I would add that digital technology is helpful to develop hyper tradition in films. Kantana’s 3D animation is but the epitome. Since the animation out-does the narrative of *King Naresuan*, Kantana’s *Khan Kluay* signals a special relation with the dominant forces in the field of film production.

Apichatpong’s *Blissfully Yours*, however, deconstructs any analogies to reality or tradition by consequently rejecting the reproduction of signifiers referencing to any of the possible traditions his story from the borderlands could draw from. As the symbol of Thai independent film, his credits are entirely attributable to the fact that he has been able to accumulate sufficient social and symbolic capital to turn his cultural capital into assets. Such exchange is conform with Bourdieu’ian studies in France, but the trajectories of Apichatpong’s films through transnational value chains did not occur in the national boundaries of the Thai film industry. Nor could he achieve his socio-political status in that context. He, as well as other independent-minded directors/producers find in transnational fields, the different ‘tastes’ which Bourdieu found. Where forces with different values and a ‘taste’ for ‘cultural diversity’, ‘distinction’, ‘expression of cultural identity’, ‘social criticism’ and ‘art’ are embedded in society. A few Thai film directors/producers are engaged in value circuits in the visual arts and the field of film productions. Transnational capital, notably the Catholic

Council of Thailand for Development, was sponsoring critical films as early as the 1970's and 1980's. The production and distribution companies which recognise and validate Apichatpong's films, and are consequently willing to invest into further production, marketing, distribution and exhibition, do this because his films meet theirs and other intellectual elite's tastes. The monopoly of the commercial art producing forces in the national field of production, which drives independent producers of 'pure art' into global hands, is thus symbolically challenged: Distinct formats, styles and narratives can gain value on the global market of symbolic goods instead of being denied them. Knowing Thai history books, Apichatpon's deconstruction of the predominant imagery is not a coincidence. Another way of by-passing is parody: through intentional repetition of the dominant signifiers - which presupposes and confirms emancipation. Bourdieu writes, that in this case, "the newcomers 'get beyond' the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly enouncing it, but by repeating and reproducing it in a socially non-congruent context, which as the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention it is" (1993: 31).