

CHAPTER II

AN OVERVIEW OF THAI CINEMA

The history of cinema in Thailand reportedly began with the advertisement of the first movie screening in the Bangkok Times Daily Newspaper on June 10, 1897. It was brought by S.G. Marchovsky and his team, the Parisians. Then, the arrival of Japanese showmen in 1904 led to the construction of the first movie-house in Bangkok by a Japanese investor. After that, theater business in Bangkok began to boom. Thai aristocrats began to take movie making as hobbies. Hence, it can be said that they were the first group of amateur filmmakers (Dome Sukavong, 1990: 10). Prince Sanpasartsupakij was the first cinematographer in Siam who made films about King Chulalongkorn's royal activities. In 1922, the film distributing division of the State Railway Topical Film Service was founded in order to publicize Thai Railway services. Since then, more and more films were made by the public and private sectors.

To date, movies have been known to Thai people for approximately 80 years. Throughout those years, with the spontaneous support of Thai government, Thai cinema has gone through several stages of development under constraints of both internal and external forces. A notable external force can be said to be Hollywood influence. To better understand the progression of Hollywood influence on contemporary Thai cinema, it is necessary to study Thai film history linearly from the beginning to contemporary era while sketching out influences of Hollywood movies that might occur in each period.

The stages of development can be divided into four periods¹. The four periods are **Traditional Era (1923 – 1973)**; **Progressive Period (1973 – 1985)**; **Transitional Period (1985-1993)**; and **Contemporary Period (1993-present)**.

A. Traditional Era (1923-1973)

This period covers the emergence of first Thai film, *Nang Sao Suwan*, shot by a group of American film unit led by Henry A. MacRae from Universal Picture, through 1973, the year when Thai film began to divert from traditional format to progressive style. Thai films in this period were said to evolve from *Khon*, *Lakorn*, *Likay*, and shadow plays which are traditional forms of entertainment of the country (Sirichai Sirikaya, 1988). Interestingly, all classical performances including Thai drama and dance are indivisible: stories are taken from the same source, mainly folktales. The only difference is the performing styles. For example, *Khon* performances are characterized by vigorous, highly formalized action. Actors and actresses are masked and cannot speak. Narrative verses are usually recited and sung by a chorus. *Lakorn*, on the other hand, is less formalized. Movements are more graceful, sensual and fluid with the upper torsos and hands being particularly expressive with conventionalized movements portraying specific emotions. As for *Likay*, it contains elements of pantomime, comic folk opera, and social satire, and is generally performed against a simply painted backdrop during temple fairs. The dialogue is spontaneous and overwhelmed with outrageous puns and

¹ Extracted from Dome Sukavong, 1990; Sirichai Sirikaya, 1988; Somchart Bangchang, 1990; 100Years of Thai Film History[Online], 1999.

double entendres. Shadow plays, namely *Nang Yai* and *Nang Talung*, are shadow shows performed by puppets behind a back lit white screen. Concealed from audiences, the manipulators are skilled singers and comedians whose repartee keeps the actions bubbling (Thailand Culture and Information. [Online]: 2000, September 15.)

Though *Khon*, *Lakorn*, *Likay*, and shadow plays differ in terms of performances, they share the same characteristic in terms of narrative, characterization, and clear-cut ending which are typical characteristics of all **Thai films in the Traditional Era.**

Narrative-wise, Thai films are melodrama. A single film contains various moods such as romantic, tragic, comic, combative, etc. These elements bring the films closer to Thai folktales which explains why Thai people enjoy watching them. Plots of *Khon*, *Lakorn*, *Likay*, and shadow plays are drawn mainly from the *Ramakian*, the *Jatakas*, and folktales (Thailand Culture and Information. [Online]: 2000, September 15.) The typical themes depict the romance between a couple who come from different social status, in-law conflict or jealousy between a wife and minor wife or wives. Interestingly, these themes are familiar to Thai people, as they have been woven into their lifestyle (Siraporn Nathalang, 2000: 1-23). This confirms how popular the themes were among Thai audience.

Thai films in this period implemented the logic of characterization by adapting the four dominant traditional characters: the ideal hero and heroine, the villains, and the hero's sidekick. All of them have no dimension in their personality (the so-called "flat character"). Therefore, it is easy to guess who or what the character is. For example, the villain must be a bad guy who is mean and aggressive. By contrast, the hero must be noble, benevolent, good-looking, and skillful in the art of fighting. Note that the concept of hero in Thai films starting from *Traditional Era* is different from Thai folktales. For instance, Thai heroes such as *Khun Paen* (in *Khun Chang, Khun Paen*), *Phra Apai Manee* (in *Phra Apai Manee*), and *I-Nao* (in *I-Nao*) are polygamy. They can have as many wives as they want. Their heroism is inherited from birth i.e. their social status and additional qualities such as nobility, incompatible fighting skill, and necessarily, good physical appearance. On the contrary, the film hero is influenced by the Western concept of gentleman. Apart from being brave and good-looking, he is polite, generous, calm, responsible, and loyal to the woman he loves.

Towards the end, the result of one's deed must stand out prominently i.e. the villain ends up with bad result because of his bad deeds; the hero and the heroine reunite and live happily ever after. This clear-cut resolution was inherited from Thai traditional performances based on folktales. Always, the hero/heroine is awarded with happiness after having such a difficult life all along.

The above analysis indicates that from the early period of Thai cinema, the traditional form of entertainment was the most influential factor for the medium. *Nang Sao Suwan* directed by Herry MacRae is an obvious example. The production of this film was sponsored by the State Railway. MacRae gave the finished film which was shot in 35 mm, a total of eight reels, to Siam Cinematography Co., Ltd. This film was shown to the Thai public and the income was donated to Siam Red Cross Foundation. Though it was considered the first feature film by a US production unit with all Thai casts, it distinctly displayed the influence of Thai traditional forms of entertainment in its plot: the love between Suwan, a daughter of a well-to-do family and Nai Klahan, an official who was despised for his poverty. Toward the end, he turned out to be an heir to a noble family from the north which made him socially equal to Suwan.

The melodramatic tone and the clear-cut happy ending of *Nang Sao Suwan* is similar to the story of *Sangthong (Golden Conch Shell)*, one of the famous Thai folktales. The story of *Sangthong* can be summarized as follows:

A king has two wives: the major wife who gives birth to a son born in a conch shell; and the jealous minor wife. The minor wife influences the king to banish the major wife and her conch shell son out of the kingdom. They have to live with an old couple. Everyday, Prince Sang, the conch shell son, comes out of the shell to help his mother do the housework. Eventually, the mother finds out and breaks the shell. The minor wife learns where they are and tries to get

rid of Prince Sang. Later on, a lady giant takes care of Prince Sang. One day, Prince Sang goes to the cave that the lady giant forbids him to and jumps into a golden well. He also puts on an ugly mask and flies away. He comes across the Samon Kingdom. King Samon has seven beautiful daughters. He announces to all kings to send their sons for his daughters to choose and get married. The six daughters choose their husbands, but Rodjana, the youngest daughter, does not. She, instead, chooses Prince Sang known as Chao Ngo (because of the mask that he puts on) since she can see his golden body while others cannot. King Samon is so furious that he chases away Rodjana and his son-in-law to live in the rice field. King Samon wants to find a way to humiliate and kill Chao Ngo. So he orders all of his sons-in-law to bring him a hundred fish and a hundred deer. Chao Ngo has a magic spell so he can bring what the king orders, while the six sons-in-law cannot. Finally, Chao Ngo helps King Samon save the kingdom and reveals his golden body and his royal origin. (Siraporn Nathalang, 2000: 9-10).

In 1927, Bangkok Picture Company, run by the Wasuwat Brothers, produced *Choke Song Chan*, the first commercial Thai film. It was a silent film shot in 35-m.m. black and white and was regarded as the first film ever produced by Thai filmmakers. After that a group of Thai officers made another film entitled *Mai Kid Leoy (The Unexpected)*. Soon a number of films were to follow, such as *Krai Dee Krai Dai (The Best Gets It)*, *Krai Pen Ba (Who's Mad?)*, *Leod Kaen (Blood of Revenge)*, *Kam Sanong Kam (What Comes Around Goes Around)*, *Mad Por Ka (The Merchant)* etc. Sirichai Sirikaya

(1988: 61) gives a straight comment on films produced during that time as follows:

“...costume of the characters is not realistic enough because the hero wears “*pamuang*” or Thai lower garment worn by men, while fighting with the villain. Moreover, the hero must portray the “good guy” value: he cannot be evil. Such characterization conveys the idea that Thai cinema still inherits from traditional performance i.e. *Khon* and *Lakorn*.”

Among the films made in this period, *Seang Maha Pinart (The Disastrous Light)* was noted for its ingenious incorporation of lighting technique into the film. This is an initial sign of the early influence of western film style on Thai film in terms of production technique.

In 1930, *Rob Rawang Rak (Battle In The Middle Of Love)*, written and directed by KhunVichit Matra, was produced. It was a very successful film of the time with special effects such as the use of bombs and machine guns together with night scenes that created excitement to the battle field scene. The film was about a farmer who later became soldier in the war, his lover whom he had to leave because of his duty, and the villain who tried to steal his lover. In this film, there was notably a moment of excitement in the battlefield scene, and a tint of sadness resulting from departing the beloved. The film was based on the style of traditional art forms i.e. fixed characters, formulaic thematics

and combined moods. Because Thai people were familiar with these elements, the filmmakers of this period incorporated them into their films. As a result, the audience enjoyed Thai films in much the same way that they enjoyed other forms of Thai dramatic arts.

In 1931, during the reign of King Rama VII, the first government regulation on filmmaking, namely the 1930 Film Act, was enforced. The idea was to cope with the rapid growth of commercial film industry. The Act aimed at keeping movies under control by forbidding elements contradictory to morality, culture and social order (section 4). According to Unit 3 of the 1930 Film Act, the Film Censorship Board was assigned to examine films before being released to movie theaters. The censorship put emphasis on movies that had impact on overt sexual behavior and politics since the government was facing a state of instability and class problem was a current issue in the society. Any films containing vulgar language, obscene images, explicit love scenes, and violence would be banned from being shown in theaters (Kanittha Chitprakorb, 1998: 44.) The regulation of the 1930 Film Act created a great impact on filmmaking. It means that filmmakers had to play safe by making films with the same theme over and over again: romantic love, jealousy, in-law conflict, etc. The recycling of theme was known as 'nam nao'. It was the only alternative open for Thai filmmakers in order to avoid forbidden subjects imposed by the 1930 Film Act (Ibid: 90.)

At the coming of sound, *The Jazz Singer*² (1929) was the first talking picture to be introduced to Thai audience in 1931. This film probably rendered its first-hand Hollywood influences on the production of the first sound movie, *Long Tang (Going Astray, 1932)*. It was produced by the Wasuwat brothers who built Sri Krung Studio, the first sound film studio in Thailand. Interestingly, *Long Tang* was the first film to reflect problems of urban society by putting emphasis on ideal virtue and the punishment of the vice. Moreover, “....it was the first Thai talking film which followed the *farang* model of talking movies, shown in Thai movie theater” (Khun Vichit Matra Foundation, 1998: 145). This film was shot with the single system i.e. using one camera for shooting both the image and sound. This created several problems in developing and editing the film. At this time, the Western world had implemented the double system which requires two cameras: one for shooting and the other for recording the sound by using a synchronizing motor which helps the two cameras to work simultaneously at the same time. With the effort of the Wasuwats, the double system was perfected the following year. The year 1933 marked the grand opening of *Chalermkrung* Theater which was the first movie theater equipped with an air-conditioning system. This was the vision of King Rama VII who wanted it to be a convenient entertaining place for Thai people as well as to be the pride of Thailand. Meanwhile, Sri Krung Studio had successfully developed its double-system film production. The first film shot in a double system was *Pou Som Fao Sap (Pou Som, The Guardian Spirit,*

² The first talking picture produced in the US in 1927 (Turner, 1993: 11). It is believed that when it was shown in Thailand, the title was changed to *King of Jazz* as a number of Thai scholars and historians have referred to.

1933), which was screened in Chalemkrung Theater. As writer and director of *Pou Som Fao Sap*, Khun Vichit Matra admitted that he had been inspired by American ghost movies (Ibid.):

“Lately, there have been a number of ghost stories such as Frankenstein, Zombies, etc. produced by American moviemakers. So, I have decided to write Pou Som Fao Sap, a ghost film developed with modern scientific matter.”

It should be noted that Thai pop music *Kluay Mai* (Orchid) was for the first time composed for this film. The reason for adding music to the film, according to Khun Vichit Matra (Ibid: 27), the composer, is that

“Farang movie i.e. King of Jazz, first shown at Pattanakorn movie theater in 1931, was overwhelmed with songs and music throughout the movie. I think Blaze of Glory also contains many songs. It seems to me that in talking movie music and songs are very important. Thus, to produce Thai talking film, I should insert songs and music into the film.”

To make films for publicizing military missions, the Ministry of Defense hired Sri Krung Company in 1934. New weaponry such as machine guns, bombs, armored tanks, battle ships, big airforce planes, etc. were used as significant props in the production of *Leod Tahan Thai* (*Thai Soldiers’*

Blood.) However, the most famous film of that time was *Pleang Wan Jai (My Melody Song, 1937)* which was a musical. This film was a good example of the impact of Hollywood influences at this time. The story took place in a foreign land known as Sancoszar where a Thai pilot had a plane crash. Several kinds of western music such as Rumba and Quick Waltz, new to Thai people at that time, were included in this film. This film owed part of its success to Mr. Nart Thawornbut who composed 8 songs with different rhythms for the soundtrack. Apart from increasing the pleasure of the audience and loosening grip with the traditional style, the sound movie paved way for Thai films to enter world competition. The 35mm black and white film, *Phrajao Changpueg (King Changpueg, 1940)*, produced by Preedee Phanomyong, was the first Thai movie to have English language dialogue dubbed by the cast. The main reason for using the English language dialogue in this film was to enable it to participate in the Noble Prize in Peace. This was a so-called “propaganda” film aiming against Fascism which was prosperous in Germany, Japan and Thailand. It also attempted to capture the true meaning of peace.

Another instance of Hollywood influence upon Thai films can be traced in the construction of Sri Krung Studio. This is clearly stated in the article written by Khun Vichit Matra (Ibid : 43):

“Bangkapi... should be a place for setting up the sound film studio in the same way of Hollywood’s in the United States. Therefore, in 1933, Sri

Krung decided to buy a big piece of land to build the studio... The blue print was to imitate Hollywood studio.”

To sum up, up to this point, Hollywood influences were more or less evident in various ways, i.e. production technique and sound system including studio model. The phenomenon appeared inconsistently depending on the technological innovation by Hollywood.

During World War II (1941-1946), movie business was temporarily halted. The major movie distributor, i.e. the US, was unable to make new movies. As a result, Thai stage performance became very popular, producing a number of good actors and actresses who, after the decline of the stage performance at the end of World War II, turned to be important figures in Thai films of the following period. At the end of 1952, the stage performance declined while the film was gaining an increasing popularity. Several founders of drama troupes turned to produce films or went abroad to study filmmaking. For instance, Prince Bhanubhandh Yugala, the founder of the Asawin Drama Troupe, went to the United States in order to further his studies in filmmaking (Sirichai Sirikaya, 1988: 88-89).

The post World War II is another significant period in Thai film history. There was a unique use of cheap, sub-standard film i.e. the 16-mm. due to economic necessity and the shortage of 35-mm filmstock. The United States

Information Service (USIS) brought a number of 16-mm films to Thailand. Most of them were 20-30 minute newsreels and cartoon animation by Walt Disney Production Company. The first film shot in 16 mm. was *Muang Tong (Golden City)* by Luen Pongsopon but it was not as popular as the blockbuster success of *Suparb Burut Suea Thai (Thai Gentleman)*, directed by Tae Prakas-Wudhisarn. Most of the films produced after *Suparb Burut Suea Thai* took it as a role model by presenting the criminal hero known as *Suea* (literally, *Tiger*), meaning “Bandit”, as the hero, e.g., *Song Suea (Two Tigers)*, *Chatchai (Manhood)*, and *Saming Pa Sak (The Tiger Of Pasak)*. According to the research done by Visit Sasanatieng, director of *Fa Talai Jone* (2000), “Suea” in Thai films was influenced by cowboy movies and assimilated into Thai style in terms of plot, costuming and character movement (wide-brim hat, leather shirts, boots, moustache, cigarette between the lips, etc.) (Manootham Tiebtiemrattana, 2000: 36). This started a new trend in filmmaking as far as of the leading character is concerned.

With the success of 16- mm film, a number of investors were interested in financing the production of film in the hope to earn quick profit. A great number of 16-mm films were produced. However, those films were therefore not made with a serious intention. The quality of image was thus poor and the storylines unexciting. The majority of films resumed the escapist theme. Best-selling novels and popular radio plays became the major sources of film content. There was no established or clearly-defined genre. One film copied

another in the hope to be equally successful. Films produced in this period soon began to form their own tradition which was similar to the melodramatic format³ of the West. This later became formulaic, typical of Thai films. One could find love plot, life in crisis, violent/action scenes, nerve-breaking thrills, tragic moments with an addition of sex, glamour, gags, slapstick, and a happy ending (Dome Sukavong, 1990: 29). This led to the term used to characterize Thai films that were similar to melodrama: “*nam nao*”⁴.

As a means of escapism, a typical film of this period portrayed a hero of noble origin: a member of royalty or an aristocrat who had his education overseas. The heroine was a poor lass: a slum girl or a servant with a heart of gold. Because of her good deed, her true identity was found. As the story unfolded, she was actually a missing heiress to a wealthy family. Her wearing a locket or having some birthmark could prove this. Finally, she ended up getting married with the hero and lived happily ever after. Such plot is not different from Thai traditional performance. The films of this period were thus criticized as being “in the same situation” as Thai stage performance of early 1947 (Sirichai Sirikaya, 1988: 106).

To solve the problem, new actors and actresses were introduced to the screen. One of those new actors was Mitr Chaibuncha, the forever star. The audience flooded the movie theaters in order to see their favorite film star,

³ Drama that is full of exciting events and exaggerated typecast characters (hero, heroine, and villain). It is written in order to serve the market. (Elementary Dramatic Arts Section 1-2: Introduction to Dramatic Arts, 1983: 53-55).

⁴ Literally, stagnant water, a connotative meaning of Soap Opera.

despite the boring plots. This gave rise to the “star system”⁵ in Thailand which is another evident instance of Hollywood influences upon Thai film. The most famous star couples of this period were the actor, Mitr Chaibancha and the actress, Petchara Chaowarath. The first movie, *Ban Tuk Rak Pimchawee* (*Pimchawee’s Love Diary*, 1962) in which they starred together, made this duo the biggest hit of that time.

Apart from the widespread of 16-mm. film, almost all Thai films made after World War II were so-called “silent films”. Dubbing was another way to cut down the expenditure. The dubbing persons would use their wit and imagination to enhance aesthetic elements of the film. They were sometimes crowd-pleasers and could draw the attention of the audience more than the stars themselves.

During the two decades that followed World War II, the Thai film industry reached its peak in 16-mm film production. Yet, a number of filmmakers continued to make their films in standard 35-mm format. Among those 35-mm filmmakers was Ratana Pestonyee, producer/director of Hanuman Film Production who sent his film *Santi-Veena* (1953) to the Asian Film Festival 1954 held in Tokyo, Japan. The film depicted rural lifestyle in which Buddhist monks and temples were a central part. It won three awards: best photography, best art direction and best cultural promotion. This was noted as

⁵ It means monopolization of the stars. Star System was originated in Hollywood by the first cast list in credits of the Edison Company (one of the two biggest production companies, along with Biograph).

the first time in Thai film history that a Thai film was selected as an award-winner at a regional level.

In 1964, the Sub-committee on Promoting Thai Film Industry declared filmmaking as a national industrial outlet which deserves governmental support. To compare this move with the enforcement of the 1930 Film Act, the government had shown more concern to the film industry by giving it support instead of imposing control. It should be noted that the Thai government played a considerable role in putting an end to the 16mm era because in 1969, the government offered an investment promotion patent to the industry under the condition that the patentee must produce only 35mm films. Apart from the government support of the 35mm film, the 16mm film was also brought to an end with the great success of Piac Poster's first 35mm film *Tone* (*Tone*, 1971) and the sudden death of Mitr Chaibancha in 1970 (Dome Sukavong, 1990: 46). Though the 16mm film production was brought to an end, the 'formula' emerged within this period has become the prominent characteristic of Thai films.

Evidently, influences of Hollywood movie had a traceable but not yet substantial impact on Thai film. From the very beginning of the silent film era, Thai filmmakers copied visual style and technique, such as the use of lighting. Then, the introduction of sound paved way to the talking film in which another instance of Hollywood model can be clearly traced, i.e. films containing songs

and music. However, the narrative was unchanged. The typical plot, characterization, and theme of traditional Thai performance were still the main staple in the Thai film. Later, with the halt of American movie business during WW II, Thai stage performance became famous. Despite the fact that Thai stage drama was a recycle of traditional performance, its popularity was gradually lessened. Then, 16-mm. film was brought to popularity. At this point, Hollywood influence had substantially disappeared. The storylines of Thai films, again, were taken from famous novels (commonly used in Thai stage drama) in which plot, theme, and characterization were familiar to Thai audience. The “star system” was the only Hollywood influence at that time.

To sum up, this period reflects the influence of Hollywood movies on Thai cinema which mainly appeared in the form of production technique and the “star system”. Still, the influences were rather direct and superficial. By contrast, the narrative of Thai films still maintained the traditional format with the kind of storylines that were familiar to Thai audience i.e. having typecast characters; beginning with the doomed fate of the hero/heroine and ending with a happy reunion; containing many sub-plots and comic scenes created by the hero sidekick. Therefore, the Hollywood influences on Thai film in this period appeared inconsistently and in partial relationship with traditional formula inherited from classical performance. With the government control via film censorship, the plot of Thai film was inevitably recycling around the typical ‘*nam nao*’ characteristic.



B. Progressive Period (1973-1985)

The 1970s signified the beginning of a film establishment of 35mm sound-on-film production. This period is marked by two political uprising events of 1973 and 1976. These were significant turning points in Thai society as well as in Thai cinema since the political changes encouraged the directors to express their social viewpoint through their films. Film, therefore, is no longer a mere art form but becomes a tool for social expression. Apart from technological advancement and changes within society, there were new directors who dared to produce films that contained different subject matters from films of the past. These directors were “the seeds of a new generation”: they either graduated from university or had degrees in Film, for example, M.C. Chatrichalerm Yugala and Chana Kraprayoon both graduated from the United States. Moreover, there were a number of courses on films and performing arts taught in Thai universities such as the Department of Mass Communication and Public Relations (founded in 1965) later known as the Faculty of Communication Arts, and the Department of Dramatic Arts, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

This group of newcomers were, as stated by Klausner,

“..ambitious and imaginative directors (who) have broken the traditional mold. They’ve sought new faces and treated contemporary themes with frankness; avoided complicated and irrelevant subplots;

discarded comedy and violence when not relevant to the storyline and used improved editing and photographic techniques.” (Klausner, 1993: 337)

The ‘New Wave’ (used by Klausner) took their new position in filmmaking and experimented their social criticism style in Thai films. Consequently, Thai films produced in this period shifted from escapism to films that focused on reality. By reflecting upon the present society, the films were more likely to symbolize a slice of real life. They were aimed at appealing to an educated urban audience by treating contemporary social issues as their main storyline. This style of filmmaking was more or less closely linked with the Western model which was more realistic than idealistic. The films produced in this period were considered “unconventional” since they depicted current events instead of wish fulfillment. M.C. Chatrichalerm Yugala and Piac Poster were the two pioneer directors who took the lead in breaking the pattern of Thai film and imposed influence on the next generation of Thai filmmakers.

One of the most successful films of the period which paved way for a new trend in Thai film was *Tone* by Piac Poster. *Tone* is aimed at attracting a new target audience i.e. teenagers. Since most of the earlier Thai films had put emphasis on adulthood, *Tone* would be a breakthrough in terms of its target audience. Moreover, the film also involved social concern. Another significant characteristic of this film is the editing technique. The film was edited with

quick, abrupt movement in order to stimulate the audience's excitement. Such technique had been widely used by Hollywood movies long before that time.

Apart from *Tone*, there were a number of films on social awareness that could call the attention of the elite such as *Mai Mee Sawan Sam Rab Khun* (*There's No Heaven For You*, 1974) by Parinya Leelasorn, *Talad Phromajaree* (*Virginity Market*) by Sakka Charujinda, etc. Other films were taken from Thai novels which sought to deal with social problems such as Suwannee Sukontha's *Kao Shu Karn* (*Mr. Karn*, 1972), directed by M.C. Chatrichalerm Yugala; Krissana Asokesin's *Nam Sor Sai* (1974), directed by Khunawut; See Fa's *Kao Nok Na* (*Half Breed*, 1975), directed by Piac Poster, etc.

In 1977 the film industry received support from the government in the form of heavy duty on foreign films. This led to a greater demand on local film production in order to fill the 700 theaters all over the country. The number of films were increased from an average of 80-100 films per year in the early 1970s to 120-160 films. The trend of Thai films of this period was shifted back and forth between the traditional and progressive pattern. For example, Dokdin Kanyamal's *Mae Dok Kancha* (1977) followed the traditional style, whereas M.C. Chatri Chalerm Yugala's *Tongpoon Kokpo, Ratsadon Tem Khan* (*The Citizen*, 1977) belonged to the progressive style. However, some of the New

Wave directors, such as Chana Kraprayoon, turned to produce films that identified with the traditional culture e.g. *Wai Sawing (Swinging Age, 1980)*.

Though Hollywood movies confronted a heavy duty causing a temporary halt of the imported movies, the Hollywood influence upon Thai films did not cease: it came directly with the educational background of the 'New Wave' filmmakers, who initiated a new film style of the period. The audience, too, were more sophisticated. They looked for certain messages in the film besides entertainment. Consequently, Thai films were produced with realistic and serious subject matters while at the same time aiming at entertaining the audience. Hollywood influence was not on the superficial level as in the former period. As the country developed, people were able to obtain higher education either locally or overseas. The filmmakers thus merged their filmic knowledge with Thai culture, thereby producing more realistic films. In the **Traditional Era**, the filmmakers followed the pattern set by Hollywood movies, causing the influences to appear in the use of technique only. In this period, Hollywood influences had become tools for depicting Thai social context.

C. Transitional Period (1985-1993)

In the early 1980's, the number of films dropped noticeably to 100 films a year comparing to the past decade during which time 300 films were

produced per year (Supplementary Document presented at the Seminar on To The Future of Thai Films, 1988: 3). In 1981 the troop of Hollywood distributors began to bombard Thai theaters with American movies after a short boycott in the late 1970s'. With an increasing competition from Hollywood movies, Thai films had very few places to fit in the theaters. The audience willingly turned to "quality films" for a change. Moreover, the increasing quality of the four television stations together with an additional station, the Public Television run by the Public Relations Department, including the home video market, distracted Thai movie goers to a significant degree. In the struggle to maintain their output, Thai filmmakers solved the problem by focusing on teenage films, thus marking the **Transitional Period** from 1985 to 1993.

Peud (pseudonym of Mr. Thanit Jitnukul) and Uncle (pseudonym of Mr. Adirek Wattalila) were the pioneers when they directed *Seum Noi Noi Kalon Mak Noi (Happy Go Lucky, 1985)*. The film was the breakthrough for a new sub-genre "teenage comedy" and boosted its studio, Tai Entertainment. Films made in this period focused mainly on teenage lives in senior high school. This group of films are known collectively as '*Kraprong Ban Khasan*' or 'Blooming Skirt and Shorts' (Pensiri Sawaitviharee, 1998.) Examples of these films include: *Prod Sab Kid Tueng Mak (Please Know....Miss A Lot, 1986)*, *So Au Wo Hong Song Roon Seesibsee (So Au Wo No. 2, Class 44, 1990)*. *Kling Wai Kon Por Sorn Wai (Just Go!!, 1991)*, *Por Samrab Bang Wan (Por for*

Someday, 1992), *A Nueng Kid Tueng Por Sang Khabe* (*Miss You*, 1992), etc. Even Budit Rithikol, the well-known independent filmmaker, made a debut comeback with the multi-million slapsticks in *Bunchoo* (*Mr. Bunchoo*) series (a story of a naïve countryman who comes to study in Bangkok). The sequel of *Bunchoo* sent his name to the top-list and enabled him to make other high-quality films with more serious subjects such as *Deuy Klaw* (*The Seed*, 1987) and *Kala Krang Ngueng* (*Once Upon A Time...*, 1995).

It should be noted, however, that the films made in this period had formulaic plots and uninspiring contents with the aim to boost singer-actor stars. The moods of these films are comedy and romance. Despite the large number of teenage films released during this period, they were repetitions in terms of content, plot, narrative, and stars. Amidst the growth of foreign movies, it is believed that “Thai movie is dead”. However, the volume of teenage films continued to expand and earned a large sum of money, with the young stars as their selling point. Over a hundred films were released to theaters each year so as to satisfy the majority of audience composing of teenagers who readily identified themselves with the characters in the movies.

The films of this period were produced cyclically in the same pattern – a phenomenon similar to Thai stage performance and ‘*nam nao*’ films of the **Traditional Era**. The mainstream of Thai films turned to serve entertainment purposes and consequently enjoyed large audiences, featuring the copycat of

the teenagers' lifestyle as their main subject matter. In so doing, Thai filmmakers believed that they could compete with the bombarding of Hollywood movies which overflowed after several years of tax wall.

As a result, Thai film of this period was shaped to lure a large group of audience, i.e. teenagers, who tend to go for Hollywood movies. Putting emphasis on teenagers' high school lifestyle seemed to be the only way to compete with the influx of Hollywood movies. Thus, the film in the **Transitional Era** was not strictly influenced by Hollywood movies but was the result of the industry's attempt to win back the market share. Hence, it can be said that the nature of film was influenced by teenagers who compose the majority of the audience. This period marks the transition to the next one in which the copycat version of Hollywood movies becomes an irresistible solution for Thai films in order to survive in the market.

D. Contemporary Period (1993 – present)

The films produced since 1993 were challenged by the emergence of modern movie houses equipped with Multiplex screening system pioneered by EGV in 1994. "Designed to support Hollywood special effects" (For Thai Film Industry[Online]: 2000, January 10), these modern movie theaters led to the dramatic change in film style and narrative which are similar to music video. In a way, the new trend follows the current of mainstream Hollywood. The music video-like presentation is the result of the society entering "Postmodern" period

in which the cultural assimilation takes place, and is dominated by consumerism. Thus, many forms of art altered their stylistic presentation to serve emotional satisfaction of consumers who seek happiness from culture and materialism. Thai movies are no exception. As Pensiri Sawaitviharee (1998: 115) states, Thai films are entertainment products rather than intellectual products. Cinematic techniques are used to stimulate infinite happiness instead of giving a lesson. Several directors thus brought in new methods of filmmaking e.g. using images instead of dialogue to tell the story, embarking on quick and abrupt camera movement, using special effects (both visual and sound) to create joy and seriousness in the movie. As noted by Manop Udomdeja, a leading Thai director,

“in the past if any Thai film made use of quick and abrupt movement, it would be rejected by the industry. The given reason was that the audience could not follow the storylines. But now it is totally different because the audience now complains about the clumsiness of the film. The ‘modern’ audience wants to consume everything in a quick speedy manner. This can be seen through fictions being sold in the market. The best selling books are more likely to be those that are written in dialogue rather than in long rhetorical description.” (Pattanasit Thooptien, ed., 1999: 56)

As regards the narrative, though most of the films still revolved around the lives of teenagers, they tried to present other aspects of teenagers' lives rather than mere romantic elements.

Hollywood movies are considered 'quality' products displayed around the world. Hence, to attract the audience's attention, Thai films deliberately insert Hollywood elements to satisfy the taste of the moviegoers. Several techniques as well as contents from Hollywood movies are applied to Thai films. As a result, Thai movies gradually become similar both in content and style to 'quality' products of Hollywood studios.

By mid 1990's, two films launched a new style by introducing new subject matters to Thai audience. They were Niratsai Kaljaruek's *Kawao Tee Bang Pleng (The Koel At Bang Pleng, 1994)*, and Udom Udomroj's *Kutae Song Lok (Soul Mate From Two Worlds, 1994)*. The former deals with invasion from outer space and the latter deals with the unusual relationship between human being and vampire. Later on, a major turning point in Thai filmmaking arrived with two other films, *Lok Tang Bai Hai Nai Khon Dieuw (The Whole World Is For You Only, 1995)* and *Kerd Eek Tee Tong Me Ter (I Got To Have You Again, 1995)*, directed by Rachain Limtrakul and Pratyta Pinkaew, respectively. Both are new directors who obtained their experience from the music industry. The two films introduced a new editing style, that creates a quick, abrupt, jerky movement. Since then, many new directors from

advertising business, music companies, and those who graduated directly in filmmaking, have lightened up the Thai film industry. Again, Hollywood has a vital role to play in influencing the trend of these new directors who are able to give the utmost satisfaction to a larger audience in 'Post-Modern' period'⁶. These directors present the audience with music video or ad-like movies which are believed to be the prototype of film production in this period.

During 1995-1997, Thai cinema reached its highest peak in terms of box-office and fame. *2499 Antapan Krong Muang (Daeng Bailey And His Gangsters, 1997)* gained over 75 million baht at the box office; *Lok Tang Bai Hai Nai Khon Dieu* received 55 million baht; and *Satitak Sud Khuw Lok (The Craziest, 1996)* 48 million baht. As for the fame, *Fun Ba Karaoke (Fun Bar Karaoke, 1997)* by Pen-ake Ratanarueng had the privilege of being screened at the Berlin Film Festival 1997's International Forum of Young Cinema. It also won the Special Jury Prize from Festival Des 3 Continents at Nants, France. In addition, *2499 Antapan Krong Muang* won the Grand Prix award from 19 E Festival International Du Film Independence 1997 in Belgium. With the change in editing technique, image, and sound, including the presentation style similar to music video, Thai movies become more universal in their outlook because they follow the pattern of foreign movies. At this point, Thai film has developed alongside Hollywood movies with the aim

⁶ According to Pensiri Sawaitviharee (1998: 17), this is the period when the middle class in the city enjoys comfortable life after industrialization. The period is growing with the satisfaction of these people and consumerism is paramount in order to serve one's pleasure.

to reach international standard and gain acceptance from Thai audience. The influence of Hollywood movies is reflected in terms of inspiration of ideas for Thai filmmakers as they want their films to equate Hollywood.

Although Thai movies have gained recognition both locally and internationally, only a small number of them were released to theaters. In 1997 only 17 Thai films were produced in comparison to the larger market shares of Hollywood (For Thai Film Industry[Online]: 2000, January 10.) In the hope to lure the attention of audience, a number of Thai films follow the mainstream movie by inserting Hollywood elements. The idea is to compete with the dynamic growth of Hollywood movies, and to comply with the technological advancement currently used in movie theaters.

Since 1998, Thai films which distinctively display full-scale Hollywood influences have marked a breakthrough in Thai cinema. Extreme cases include *303 Klua/ Lka Akad (303 Fear/ Faith/ Revenge, 1998)* directed by King-Somjing Srisupab, and *Cloning: Khon Copy Khon (Cloning, 1999)* directed by Piti Chaturapatara. Belonging to the Horror genre, *303 Klua/ Lka Akad* stylistically resembles the recent Hollywood horror movies such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer (1997)*, *Urban Legend (1999)*, *Scream I, II, and III (1996, 1999, and 2000)* etc., all of which are targeted for teenage audience. They share similar characteristics, e.g. having teenagers as leading characters, the locale set in isolated area, etc. The narrative of *303 Klua/ Lka Akad* no

longer takes place in Thai school. Instead, it is a catholic boys' school. The slapstick and melodramatic elements are nowhere to be seen. The film is about the revenge of a ghost who was picked on consistently when he was alive as a student. However, what makes *303 Klua/ Lka Akad* an instant copycat of Hollywood will be discussed in Chapter IV.

Another breakthrough film, *Cloning*, directed by Piti Chaturapatara, is about the scientific advancement in pursuit of experimenting with human cloning. This concept was, as we know, originated in the West and it is the first time that a Thai filmmaker has chosen to make a film about such an unfamiliar subject. In addition to the foreign subject matter, the leading male character is not a typical Thai hero such as policeman, teacher, reporter, student, but he is a computer programmer. Such a 'hi-tech' career man has never appeared in Thai films before.

Apart from the two breakthrough films, *Nang Nak (Mrs. Nak, 1999)*, directed by Nonsri Nimibutr is also another interesting film of this time. The story is familiar to Thai people generation after generation through folktales, TV, and films, which have been produced in many versions. This version, however, is totally different from the earlier ones. Traditional versions of *Nang Nak* put emphasis on how horrible Nang Nak is as a ghost⁷ whereas this version puts emphasis on the inconceivable love between the dead Nak and the

⁷ She died in pregnancy. Her death corresponds to an old Thai belief that a pregnant mother ghost would be revengeful and most horrifying.

living Mak. After the success of *Nang Nak* which struck over B150 million from screening in Bangkok alone, a number of directors turn to produce period films such as Grammy's *Yuwachon Taharn (Young Soldiers, 2000)*, *Satang* (2000) directed by Bundit Rittakol, *Fa Talai Jone* (2000) directed by Visit Sasanatieng and the big budgeted film of all time: *Suriyothai* (film in progress) directed by M.C. Chatri Chalerm Yugala.

In 2000, there is another significant event in Thai Film industry i.e. the co-production between Thailand and Taiwan in making a film entitled *Ang Yee* (2000), co-starred by a Thai actor, Amphon Lampoon and Hong Kong actor, Lin Jiu Ing. According to the Department of Export, this is a strategy to gain quick market shares of the two countries and upgrade the quality of film by importing overseas actors or actresses. It can be said that the Thai Film industry is on the move to win recognition at a regional level.

Of all the films mentioned above, the researcher proposes to select two films which exhibit extreme Hollywood influences. These two films are *303 Klua/ Kka/ Akad* and *Cloning*. They are identifiable with Hollywood genre and produced with the content and style believed to be influenced by Hollywood movies. As a result, they are ideal for analysis in this research which sets out to examine influences of Hollywood movies on Thai films.

To conclude, influences of Hollywood movies on Thai cinema have appeared since the first genuine Thai film, *Choke Song Chan*. However, in the early stage, the influences were direct and likely to be concrete imitation of cinematic technique. Consequently, Thai films of the **Traditional Era** mainly focused on innovative technology from Hollywood. Later on, despite the heavy duty on imported foreign movies imposed by Thai government, the influence of Hollywood movies still persisted. Such influence came with the filmmakers who went for higher education abroad, especially in the United States. The film-graduated students not only used Hollywood movies as their models but also stuffed themselves with knowledge of Hollywood style of filmmaking. As a result, they applied it to films of social concern at the time when Thai people are on the alert to find out about their contemporary society. Thus, the influence of Hollywood in this period was smoothly assimilated into Thai film. Then, with the bombard of Hollywood movies after a short boycott in 1970's, Thai filmmakers had to find a way to compete with a sudden influx of Hollywood movies. The solution was teenage comedy. However, the recycle of narrative, theme, and technique of the film caused the audience to turn away from Thai films. Eventually, with the new technology equipped in movie theater to support special effects used by Hollywood movies, Thai filmmakers decided to perfect their filmmaking styles in order to reach Hollywood standard. In so doing, it calls for a need to follow the path led by the mainstream movies i.e. Hollywood, thereby causing Thai films to be entirely influenced by Hollywood movies.