

# Just another Gay Movie?

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## A Brief Comparison of Mainstream and Alternative Thai Queer Film<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

As the 'stereotyping of gays is a big issue... [and] [t]o analyse and criticise the media is important for the promotion of rights' (Jackson cited in Veena 2005), this paper deals with an issue that is so obvious part of modern Thai culture that one wonders why research on it has hitherto been that scarce: Thai queer movies. Shortly after the emergence of the Thai New Wave Cinema in 1997, films concerned with lives of *kathoey*, i.e. Thai transgenders, became a focus of cinematic culture. More recently, movies about gender normative masculine gay men are emerging. But whereas the former are products of the mainstream industry, the latter emerge out of an ever stronger independent community of filmmakers. Below, the reasons and implications of this gap will be examined.

## Cinematic Environment:

In Thailand, a sharp contrast between state tolerance towards publicly visible 'indecencies' and private practices subsists. This divide opened when Siam adjusted its moral codes to western concepts to prevent the justification for a civilizing colonial rule. Regarding gender/sexual roles, the process of *siwilai* led to the state promotion of heterosexuality and to the visual differentiation of men and women who previously had been described as androgynous by Westerners, to present a modern Siam to the outside world whereas the private sphere remained untouched (Jackson 2003, p. 38).

This 'regime of images' is reflected in the state's handling of media portrayals of gays and *kathoey*: Visual depictions of homosexuality that are accessible by foreigners face more suppression than literary representations in Thai. (Jackson 2002, pp. 204-210). Hence, as movies attract wide audiences, state control over cinematic depictions is tight. The Film Act of 1930 provides the framework and justifies the frequent cutting of scenes the censors consider harmful to social stability, thus fostering the development of an apolitical cinematic landscape and serving the elite's aim to keep the status quo and avert intellectual freedom. The law 'has been responsible for the non-stop reproduction of much of the conservative and stale cinema since its inception' (Boonrak 2007).

The informal limits to a more subversive cinema are set by the industry.<sup>2</sup> Ambitious filmmakers have to bear the risks if their movies fail, which is likely in a country where artists are constantly forced to repeat 'tradition' to serve the conservatism of the power holders. With characters still stereotyped following the model of *likay* theatre, moviegoers are hardly familiar with complex, thought stimulating plots. Indie-director Apichatpong Weerasethakul calls for a funding system as '[w]e need... something on a larger scale that aids in the production process' (Thunskä 2006).

Although trashy teen flicks and horror movies dominate the scene, in 1997 some directors came up with challenging movies.<sup>3</sup> The 'Thai New Wave' coincided with socio-sexual progressiveness triggered by a growing private sector that provided more room for civil society to express itself. Hence, a new genre was established: *kathoey*-movies.

## Mainstream *kathoey*-Movies:

In 2000 the *Iron Ladies*, a *kathoey* volleyball team from provincial Thailand who managed to win the National Games in 1996, made a comeback on-screen - the movie becoming the highest-grossing Thai

film at that time. According to the independent gay movie producer Vitaya Saeng-Aroon, 'Iron Ladies is a turning point in the history of gay-related movies in Thailand. It's the first movie that portrays positive images' (Vitaya 2007, E-Mail corr., 21. July).

*Iron Ladies* is by far not the first *kathoey* movie. Oradol (2005) described the 'First Wave of Thai Queer Cinema', referring to melodramatic films of the 1980's that presented transgenders as suffering from bad *karma* to counterbalance their TV-portrayal as clowns (Jackson 2002, pp. 220-225). Thus, a film about a group of *kathoey* who fight in the national sporting arena against officials and for social acceptance clearly constitutes a break with the past. *Iron Ladies 2* (2003), the movie's fictional sequel about what happened before and after 1996, focuses even stronger on companionship. This contrasts with findings of Altman who notes that in East Asian queer movies 'the representation of [the] emergent Asian gay communities is itself notably lacking' (Berry 2001, p. 211). Yet, in Thailand the tradition of group-centred plots is also applied to most gay movies making them accessible to straight viewers through familiar narrative structures.<sup>4</sup>

According to Lewis (2006, p. 163), the movie *Beautiful Boxer* (2003) about the real story of the country boy Nong Toom who becomes a Thai Boxer to earn money for his sex-change operation, lacked success because 'the transition from ladyboy to Mueay Thai boy was just too much for audiences'. But then why was the real Nong Toom popular enough to be sent to Tokio in order to defend *muay thai* against Japanese Wrestling? Its financial failure may be more due to the movie's un-Thai narrative style which centres on an individual. Moreover, the director did not come up to the biased expectations of the audience as he himself first worried that Nong Toom could be a clown 'like she's portrayed in the media [...]' (DVD Bonus Material). Instead, he presented a suffering boy who fights not only for his own fulfilment but also to support his family.

The movies discussed so far depict queerness in relation to the nation as *kathoey* demand their share in national sports and official acceptance.<sup>5</sup> Hence, they are differing from East Asian queer films as Berry (2001, p. 215, 218.) described them: Whereas the Confucian duty to conform to one's family duties is the main topic of these movies, Thai films deal with official acceptance. Yet, unaccepting parents do matter whenever a character is Sino-Thai.

The less profound comedy *Metrosexual* (*Gang chanee kap ee-aep*, 2006) tells about a gang of women (gay slang: *chanee*) who, equipped with a checklist to measure gayness, try to find out if Kong, the fiancé of their friend Pang, is just metrosexual or a 'hidden woman' (*ee-aep*), i.e. gay. As the director stated: 'People have come up with these theories about how to spot a closet case, but... there's a sense of paranoia in all of it' (Kong 2006).<sup>6</sup> The movie about the blurring of gender boundaries calls on gays not to hide behind 'metrosexuality' which Thai advertisers use as a convenient label to address gays.

The development of the main character in *Me... Myself* (2007) is reverse. Telling the story of a *kathoey* who turns into straight after being struck by a car and forgetting about his former life, the movie stimulates the audience to think about to which degree gender is socially constructed or biologically determined.<sup>7</sup>

Then why is Thai society so fascinated with *kathoey* that movies like *Me... Myself* became cinematic cash cows? Director Ekachai reasoned that 'Buddhist beliefs hold that transvestites were born that way as

a result of bad karma..., [w]e feel that it's not something they want to be born with... So we do have more compassion...' (BBC 2004). Thus, gracefully suffering *kathoey* attract admiration. Yet, movies without funny *kathoey* lacked success. As Suwanna Sathanand explains, the national obsession with *sanuk* (non-seriousness) is a means of releasing pressure built up by avoidance of conflict: 'Without [*sanuk*], we might have long ago gone insane' (Sanitsuda 2001, pp. 41-43). Thus, to defuse tension, amusing social critique may be more successful than serious accusations. Elites may see these movies as a convenient outlet for a society to let off steam without posing a threat, as *kathoey* are cinematically integrated into the national narrative of group-centrism and sacrifice. At the same time, outspoken *kathoey* may become a screen on which suppressed wishes are projected because, as outcasts, they do not worry about networking. Thus, *kathoey* are admired for their courage to sustain suffering and for their ability to freely express themselves.

### **Independent and Arthouse Movies:**

Whereas *kathoey* established themselves in Thai cinema, Peter Jackson provides the explanation why visible gay men have long been more problematic in a Thai context. As *kathoey* is a Thai concept, 'generally regarded [...] to be a psychological woman born inside a man's body [...]', the 'greater criticism levelled at gay men may derive from the fact that only they are considered to be genuinely homosexual' (Jackson 1999, pp. 238-239). Thus, 'perverted' masculine gays are exclusively portrayed in independent movies.<sup>8</sup>

One of those films, *Rainbow Boys* (2005), is based on a US-novel by Alex Sanchez and sold 2500 tickets at 'RCA'. Its story about Tat and Nat who meet their closeted fellow student Ek in a gay support group revolves around the blossoming love between Tat and Ek and their everyday concerns about their looks and love life. The producers Paul Bradley and Vitaya Saeng-Aroon want to counter internalized negative stereotypes of gays as they see 'a lack of positive self-images and sense of pride' as the main problems within the Thai gay community (Bradley 2007, E-Mail corr., 19. April). Thus, *Rainbow Boys* is educational in character.<sup>9</sup> Yet, though the upbeat story may have pleased gay viewers, some alleged problems appear artificial as the plot was not adapted to Thai conditions. With homophobic violence being uncommon, scenes of physical harassment seem unrealistic.

*Silom Soi 2*, a privately produced movie that promotes safer sex, love and monogamy, had two sessions at Bangkok's 'Century The Movie Plaza' in 2006. The death of a friend inspired producer Piyamitr Rangsitienchai to make this film about a gay love overshadowed by HIV. Although quite successful in terms of recognition, some viewers did not understand the film's structure, whereas others expected to see more nude scenes because of the sexy poster that lured them to watch the movie (Piyamitr, E-Mail corr., 21. July). The producer notes that 'the gay target does not appreciate to view more *kathoey* or 'gay queens'' like Tum, one of the main characters.

Meanwhile, the homosexual director Apichatpong Weerasethakul emerged as the advocate of independent Thai cinema. His greatest success so far was *Tropical Malady* which earned him a Jury Prize at Cannes.<sup>10</sup> The complex film about a developing love between two men depicts a return of man to nature and exposes that cultural norms are suppressing natural instincts like homosexuality. As Apichatpong stated, 'society says two men do not belong together, but in nature

it is more common' (Pfaff 2005). This culture/nature divide is not only represented in the movie's structural dualism - the first part playing in a town, the second in a jungle - but also within the sections. *Malady* can be read as a movie about cultural suppression and natural liberation, an elaborate message unique in Thai cinema.<sup>11</sup>

### **Towards a future of Thai queer cinema:**

Given the censorship movies like *Rainbow Boys* have to face the future outlook may at first seem all but bright.<sup>12</sup>

In May 2007 the censorship debate heated up when officials ordered Apichatpong to cut scenes from his film *Syndromes and a Century* that depicted kissing physicians and playing monks. As a result filmmakers, artists and NGOs formed the 'Free Thai Cinema Movement' to influence the draft of a new Film Act. This law would introduce a rating system to restore the popularity of Thai films among adult viewers and ease the tensions for ambitious filmmakers. However, Apichatpong called it a 'law from hell' (Parinyaporn 2007)<sup>13</sup> as there might be a 'banned' rating and a censorship board. Not only the elite but also multiplex operators resist to open creative spaces as they fear lower revenues if films are limited to age groups (ibid). We have seen how these factors led to a dualism in Thai queer film. Director Poj Annan complains that '[t]here are gay movies which are not *kathoe*y comedies but our producers are still not interested in making them' (Francis 2005). Yet, Poj tried to bridge this gulf and made the first gay movie backed by a big studio. *Bangkok Love Story* about a policeman loving a criminal already sparked criticism on the release of its trailer as the National Police feared for its image. After much hesitation, in September 2007 and following an explicit advertising campaign, the film hit the multiplexes - and failed, grossing only 11 Million Baht. Kong Rithdee (2007a) found the movie's homoeroticism 'inward-looking and self-serving'. A non-representative survey among 35 cinemagoers yielded that while the ambitious cinematography was lauded, the one-dimensional plot and the crude dialogues were criticised. Yet, 35 percent of the respondents stated that they liked gay movies more than *kathoe*y flicks, compared to 17 percent who favoured the latter. There seems to be a mainstream market for gay movies, but the depiction of gayness should not become a purpose in itself. To Poj's defence one could argue that the order to cut out scenes - there are no hints left to the main character's police affiliation - blurred the plot.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

That it was under military rule when *Love Story* as the first mainstream gay movie emerged may hint to a change in the Thai regime of images. To legitimize themselves in the wake of international criticism, undemocratic authorities opened a channel through which to promote positive images. Knowing quite well that tolerance towards homosexuals is today acknowledged as a sign of liberalism, the elite openly discussed constitutional rights for all gender identities, legal title change for *kathoe*y and allowed gay movies to be shown. This indicates a change in official approaches to homosexuality in order to boost the image of the state to distract from the overall revisionism under military rule. This opening space should be used by the mainstream film industry to diversify its style while indie-filmmakers risk passing by their audiences in overdramatising gay lives and in ignoring existing viewing habits.

**Notes:**

1. This manuscript is a much shortened version of a paper for a seminar on 'Social Transformation by Example of Southeast Asian Alternative Film'. I wish to thank my lecturer Frederik Holst for encouraging me to present it at a conference.
2. The production and distribution system is dominated by a few players. The important companies are Sahamongkol and GMM Tai Hub (production, distribution) and Major and EGV (exhibition). As these businesses are of course profit-oriented, commercial success outweighs artistic or content-related considerations.
3. Strangely enough, these movies were distributed by Tai Entertainment, one of the biggest production companies. In 2004, Tai Entertainment joined forces with GMM Pictures and Hub Ho Hin Films to form GMM Tai Hub (GTH). The CEO of the newly found company was fast in clarifying that GTH was eyeing a 40-per-cent share of the domestic film market and thus 'might not invest in alternative movie projects that could be risky in terms of profits' (Parinyaporn 2004).
4. Lewis (2006, p. 156.) noted that the 'exotic in this film [*Iron Ladies*] was the subject matter, not its style, which was conventional'. For information on the tradition of group-centred plots see Lewis 2006, pp. 167-171.
5. Nationalism again became the focus of *Saving Private Tootsie* (2002) about a group of *kathoey* who, after surviving a plane crash, find themselves in Burma and have to make it to the Thai frontier with the help of homophobic Thai soldiers. In the course of events the *kathoey* win the hearts of their escort as they turn out to be brave enough to kill Burmese troops. The message: Thainess matters, not gender.
6. Also in 2006, Nati Teerarojanapong put out a humorous guide advising women how to find out if their partner was gay.
7. Whereas *Me... Myself* was successful enough to be sold to Korea for a remake, it received heavy criticism from Thai gay rights groups who feared that parents believe their *kathoey* kids could turn into straight if they only had an accident (Veena 2007). The Public Health Department reacted and warned parents to draw wrong conclusions. In a country where psychologists like Dr Wanlop Piyamanotham tried to 'cure' homosexuals (Jackson 2002) the activist's fear is comprehensible.
8. Respective gay films are often straight-to-DVD productions for a gay audience. Sometimes they get a short theatrical release at Bangkok's arthouse cinema 'House RCA' run by Sahamongkol Film. With those movies the company can be sure to do a brisk business as 'RCA' fills a niche no other movie theatre dares to approach (Kong 2007b). Consequently, the cinema's highest grossing title ever was a gay movie, the Taiwanese 'Formula 17'.
9. The positive impact of media on homosexual identities has been highlighted by Tom Boellstorff (2003, p. 33) for the case of Indonesia where he found that 95 percent of his informants cited mass media as the means by which they first understood themselves through the concepts *lesbi* or *gay*.
10. In 2002, while waiting for the funding for *Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong made a film for his friend, the artist Michael Shaowanasai, who invented and personifies its main character, the *kathoey* secret agent Iron Pussy. *The Adventures of Iron Pussy*, a dedication to the Golden Age of 1960's naive Thai

- cinema, is progressive in that it does not make an issue of the main character's cross-dressing as there is no reason to highlight the distinctiveness of *kathoey*. *Iron Pussy* is depicted as a brave woman who is man enough to prevail over a corrupt society. Thus, it is as much about queerness as about feminism.
11. For a more comprehensive discussion of *Tropical Malady* see for example Ferrari 2006, pp. 47-62.
  12. Though the film was shown uncut at 'RCA', the Thai VCD has been censored by the Culture Ministry. Five minutes of kissing scenes had to be cut out and the final VCD version still contains blurred elements and beeped words. Piyamitr, the producer of *Silom Soi 2*, explains that the scenes that have been removed from his movie were 'mostly [seen as] passionate in Buddhism' (Piyamitr 2007, E-Mail corr., 21. July).
  13. For more on the censorship debate see for example: Kong 2007c, d and Anjira 2007.
  14. Regarding the future of independent queer movies, the gay-owned media company Cyberfish recently released the movie *Club M2* about a straight guy who has to seek refuge in a gay sauna, labelled 'Thailand's first gay pride comedy'. The movie follows a more conventional style to attract a wider audience. However, its' success lagged behind Cyberfish's more dramatic *Rainbow Boys* which had the advantage of having an established fan-base due to the well-known novel on which it was based.

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