
Ten Years Thailand: The Future Becoming

By Anchalee Chaiworaporn

The *Ten Years Thailand* project was first announced to the Thai film community in April 2017, when five participating filmmakers sought crowdfunding through the San Francisco-based Indiegogo website (unfortunately, only 2 percent of its US\$ 200,000 budget was raised in this initial campaign.) The directors involved represented both old and new generations of Thai cinema, both arthouse and popular filmmaking styles, both partisan and non-partisan ideology. The film presents speculative visions of the near future, all of which are informed in some way by Thailand's longstanding political crisis.[\[i\]](#) As the crisis has unfolded, three of the filmmakers - Wisit Sasantieng (*Tears of a Black Tiger*), Chookiat Sakveerajul[\[ii\]](#) (*13 Beloved*) and Apichatpong Weerasathekul - have shown signs of support for the 'red shirt' political movement in Thailand. The political viewpoints of Aditya Assarat (*Wonderful Town*) and video artist Chulayarnoon Siriphol are less clear. The film was shortlisted to receive a grant from Thailand's Culture Ministry, subsequently receiving the highest available sum of US\$ 30,000,[\[iii\]](#) and the finished film screened out-of-competition at Cannes, the most high-profile opening of the series so far. This version omitted Chookiat's[\[iv\]](#) section.

In its theatrical version, *Ten Years Thailand* tells four different stories about Thai society, all set in the decade following 2018, against the background of the military government that has ruled since 2014. During this period of military rule, several significant upheavals have occurred, from the initial coup to the death of King Rama IX and a serious economic downturn. The four segments are framed within two distinct settings - the realistic everyday world and surrealistic imaginative worlds - which are rendered through the use of various styles, from realist fiction to surrealism and quasi-documentary. The first and last sections of the film, Aditya's *Sunset* and Apichatpong's *Song of the City*, ground their stories in lifelike settings, invoking some sense of hope. The middle sections, Wisit's *Catopia* and Chulayarnnon's *Planetarium*, on the other hand, turn the 'land of no smiles' into a site of violence and destruction where only non-humans, cats and brainwashed people can survive.

Questions of past, present and future can be viewed in terms of what Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet called 'becomings'.[\[v\]](#) For them, 'future and past don't have much meaning' (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977, 23). Applying this to the representations of the future in *Ten Years Thailand*, I will argue that the path between 2018 and 2028 is characterised by both

a duality of quasi-immobility and mobility in time and place. Three of the four sections of the anthology take place in recognisable landscapes of the present, while *Planetarium* mixes a stylised, unreal environment with real aspects of the everyday present. Notably, the filmmakers do not choose the political movements of the early part as their starting context, presumably because the current political conflicts in Thailand began almost fifteen years ago. This lends the film an unevenness of temporal mobility, with the only signs of movement related to place, from the art gallery and urban small town to post-human dystopias of control and surveillance. However, the order of the film's episodes - from realism to surrealism and then quasi-realism - explicates the *spaces* of future Thailand, from grey-black apocalypse to land of possibility, depending on the actions people take.

In Aditya's *Sunset*, a group of soldiers and police officers make a surprise visit to an art gallery to inspect the 'unsuitable' message that appears in a photo exhibition entitled *I Laughed So Hard I Cried*. While the inspection goes on, a young naive conscript Kaen, who works as the lieutenant's driver, develops a romance with a female member of the gallery's staff. Here, Thailand appears to be divided into two opposite worlds, represented through the use of black and white cinematography. The naivety of the powerless on one hand, the exercise of power to establish what is right or wrong on the other. Director Aditya deliberately emphasizes this binary contrast, displacing questions of political polarisation - the yellow- and red-shirt conflicts - into a grey area where the multifaceted identities of both groups are represented. Thus the lieutenant, played by real-life artist Angkrit Ajchariyasophon, who is also the manager of the gallery used as the story's location, is characterised as weary of having to respond to public complaints, even making plans to have himself transferred to other duties. Kaen is portrayed as a boy who is potentially on the path to a similar position of power, but who is barely brave enough to talk to the girl he likes. Similarly, while the police chief overexercises his power against the artist and curator, another officer is seen crying in the photograph. Interestingly, power does not reside solely in the hands of officials. Annoyed by a noisy, bossy cop, the gallery's cleaner protects her territory by directing him to use an outside toilet. This low-level tactical response to institutional power might also be read in terms of the misinformation that so often defines today's world, in politics as in other areas of everyday life. Shot with low-key lighting and minimum camera movement, the sunset at the last scene is dim with little hope.

Political rifts feature in the surrealist world of *Catopia*, in which director Wisit follows the survival of a lone human being who lives among half-feline, half-human creatures. By using an artificial perfume, he can mingle with them without being noticed, until he rescues a catwoman

who is to be stoned to death, suspected of being a human in disguise. This surrealist plot, however, is set against a contemporary backdrop, signifying that the episode's themes are intended to resonate with the current time. Through the use of an entirely handheld camera, this 'paradise' of cats shows the reinforcing of political divides. Dissidents are hunted, interrogated and imprisoned by agents of a military government. Games of hunter versus hunted appear everywhere. In fact, survivors like Methee have to disguise themselves, hide or escape. Contrary to Aditya's democratic balance between interest groups, Wisit signals something related to the present climate of nonconformism. Moreover, the symbol of the cat might refer to the exile politician Thaksin Shinawat whose nickname sounds like the crying of cat or Abhisit Vejjajiva, head of the royalist Democratic Party, who is a known cat lover.^[vi] Despite the tragic end, *Catopia* is fun with the director's sense of humour that is hidden throughout the film. Catlover might enjoy to see the vending machine with full of cat's food and toys.

The anthology's third segment, Chulayarnnon's *Planetarium*, is an abstract, retro-animated mockery of official control over young people's lives that specifically targets the policies of the Ministries of Culture and Education. The episode shows youngsters' daily lives as subject to control - through Buddhism in particular - throughout childhood, from acceptable hairstyles and ways of expressing happiness to the correct ways of showing deference and religious piety. Here, all behaviour is instilled and monitored by the 'Ministry of Smartphone'. Anyone disobeying the rules - sometimes just by lying face down on the ground - must be destroyed and rebooted. Chulayarnnon playfully assembles the experiences faced by every boy and girl in Thai schools into a jukebox game of the absurd. Every detail in this segment is intended as criticism of Thai society. The scarves worn by the students are based on the uniforms worn by Thai scout troops. The female Minister of VHS is reminiscent of many female headteachers, and more specifically of the conservative former MP Rabiabrat Phongpanich, who regularly pops up in the news media to criticize anything she deems not to conform to correct female behaviour. Chulayarnnon sarcastically crafts this piece in the hyper-surrealism where a series of installation arts encounter one another.

As the anthology moves from hope to dystopia, there seems to be no future available for Thailand just a decade from now. Apichatpong's return to the realistic setting of his hometown Khon Kaen in *Song of the City* prompts Thai viewers to confront our experience of living in a country eternally undergoing reconstruction. Set in a park where there stands a statue of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, a notorious dictator who seized power in a coup in 1957 and used his power to accumulate a vast fortune in just a few years, the piece is like the reminiscences of a

director looking back upon his previous films, his hometown and the changes it has gone through in his lifetime, and the imperfections of Thailand. There are brief appearances by characters from his previous films - Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee) and Keng (Banlop Lomnoi) from *Tropical Malady* (2004), the female doctor (Nantarat Sawaddikul) from *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), and the comatose soldier from *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015). Along with these long-time associates of Apichatpong, a real-life political prisoner, Patiwat Saraiyaem, appears as a cheerful northeastern folk singer who has taken a temporary job as a salesman for the Good Sleep Machine. (In 2015, Patiwat was sentenced to a five-year jail term for insulting the monarchy in a university play. He was released two years later as part of an amnesty.) Apichatpong tries to show that in a country like Thailand that is continually being rebuilt, the notion of a positive future is a mere sales pitch, or a dream. Most of the scenes were shot with minimum movement - long-take in particular and few dialogues. Like the old man who contemplates his life in the park, life still goes on no matter how much hardship we encounter.

Under a holistic outlook, the anthology manifests the structure of fragmentation, with the linear narratives of each segment based on the present point - the middle in the time machine. Aditya's *Sunset* and Apichatpong's *Song of the City* tells the past event to the present setting; Wisit's *Catopia* and Chulayarnnon's *Planetarium* starts the present stories in the mode of future - all summed up as a 'labyrinthine model of time' (Martin-Jones, 2006, 23). While the two realists offer a trip through the directorial memories - especially in the section of Apichatpong, the surrealist segments lead us with the actions of hunt-and-escape, and controlling-and-destroying. Deleuze's time-image and action-movement are competing against one another. In fact, this duality can be seen throughout the film - the fragmentation of the whole against the linear of each section, and the characteristics of cinema of time and the cinema of movement, which at the end represent the counteraction between hope and hopelessness.

In contrast to the sense of temporal hopelessness suggested by the quote from George Orwell's *1984* at the beginning of the film - "He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past." - this anthology conflicts the concept of time and the final message. The trips to memories of *Sunset* and *Song of the City* signify some hope; the surrealists of *Catopia* and *Planetarium* show hopelessness - the future. There is no clear future, no clear becoming. Deleuze and Parnet asserted that 'becomings belong to geography' (Deleuze & Parnet, *ibid.*, p.2, 31), and so the film's characters move on and on, like nomads - like the filmmaking path in these directors. Future becoming depends on us the audiences.

Notes

[i] Thailand has been in political crisis since 2005, culminating in the division of two camps signified by color. The Red Shirts began as supporters - mostly from among the poor - of the populist party of prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, while the Yellow Shirts comprised urban, middle-class royalists who opposed Thaksin's corruption (BBC, 2012). During the long-running conflict between the two sides, the military staged two coups, in 2006 and 2014.

[ii] Chookiat's segment was also not included in the domestic release that took place at the end of 2018, with no explanation. It is said that the segment was too long to be assembled with the other four sections and would be screened separately. But his section was also submitted to the Culture Ministry, to fulfil the grant requirements.

[iii] The grants were categorized into several types, along the guidelines of other film festivals, such as script, production, or distribution, and have ranged between US\$900 - 62,500.

[iv] This essay follows the Thai custom of referring to a person by his or her first name.

[v] Gilles Deleuze and journalist Claire Parnet had planned to publish a conventional book of interviews which included those with influential writers such as Noam Chomsky. But they realized that the interview format was inappropriate and decided instead to use a 'dialogue' form consisting of two halves without distinct beginning or end. The book was titled *Dialogues*.

[vi] Abhisit Vejjajiva was the former leader of the oldest Thai political party, the Democratic Party. Graduating from Eton and Oxford, he used to be a symbol of liberal hopes for a progressive modernisation of Thai society. Wisit's antagonism towards Abhisit can also be found in his other film, *The Red Eagle*, a remake of an old action film that recasts the story as a fight for political justice by the superhero.

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Notes on Contributor

Anchalee Chaiworaporn has been writing or both local and foreign publications for two decades. Her works had been published in across the world. Since 2002, she has received foreign grants to do the research on Asian cinema in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and US. She is also a guest speaker across Asia and others. She used to be a project leader of Thailand Research Fund's national research project on criticism in arts. Presently, she is involved into a national project on the consciousness of artists in the evolution of Thai arts and culture.