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MSc in Media and Communication

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The Unmasking of Burmese Myth in Contemporary Thai Cinema

Pimtong Boonyapataro

ABSTRACT

This empirical research attempts to deconstruct the representation of Burmese in contemporary Thai cinema, and to understand how the Thai cinematic portrayal of Burmese relates to the Thai sense of national identity. The Burmese is negatively represented as 'a symbol of failure.' This is a result of Thai nationalists, such as King Chulalongkorn and General Phibun Songkarn, who intentionally shape the myth of Burmese in order to strengthen their own political power. The mythic discourse of dehumanised and devil Burmese is circulated in school texts and films. With the decline of King Bumiphol's monarchical power and the threat from Taksin Shinawatra, a former Thai Prime Minister, over a dozen Thai films made in the past ten years have centred on Thai-Burmese relations. In contrast, to general claims that Thai-Burmese relations have become more politically 'friendly', we discover an alternative hidden message within contemporary Thai cinema. This study investigates the extent to which the Burmese fill an antagonistic role within Thai nationalism.

Using Barthain semiotics as an analytical tool, we aim to uncover the underlying connotations towards the Burmese in contemporary Thai films. Semiotics not only suggest that every cinematic units connote ideological meanings but also suggests that films have their own 'language' which work to constitute reality, rather than simply reflect one. In order to determine whether Thai films from different categories created the same myths about Burmese, we analysed 3 films: 'Makli' (2011), 'The Legend of King Naresuan 5' (2014), and 'Myanmar In Love In Bangkok' (2014). While the three films came from different genres, a consistently negative mythology of the Burmese was reinforced via a paternalistic portrayal across all analysed examples. We characterised this cinematic portrayal of the Burmese as being friendly rather than evil, but clearly based on a concept of inequality. Based on these findings, I argue that a true equality cannot be reached between Thais and Burmese if Thai nationalists and filmmakers continue to reinforce an 'us-versus-them' myth of the Burmese in order to boost Thai nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

> 'The Burmese, ranging from enemies of the old capital, falling symbols of colonisation, and military state, represents the most 'Un-Thai' features, hence functions as a perfect negative identification to Thai identity'(Chachavalpongpun, 2005: 34).

During King Chulalongkorn's (1853-1910) modernisation project, over 200,000 hundred historical texts were written about the Thai-Burma battles (Winichakul, 2005). Before the modernisation project, 'Thai chroniclers were not anxious to record any historical event concerning the wars between Siam and Burma' (Chongkittavorn, 2008: 91). Towards the end of King Bumiphol's reign (1946-present), the monarchy not only faced external threats from global capitalism 'knocking on the door of Thai-ness', but also internal threats from Taksin Shinawatra (Connors, 2006: 206). While King Bumiphol's 'successor [had] insufficient authority to maintain the monarchy's current position', the role of the Burmese as a negative association of Thai identity become even more prominent in Thai cinema (Connors, 2006: 206). Indeed, over the past five years, the six most-financially-successful films were about Thai-Burmese war (Metaveevinij, 2014: 3).

This obsession has triggered my investigation into the myths surrounding the Burmese in contemporary Thai cinema. But, before exploring this idea, it is imperative to first investigate the historical context of the Thai-Burmese relationship.

Burma is adjacent to the North western part of Thailand. The two nations have always competed for the control of the South East Asia Peninsula; however, prior to the devastating fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom in 1767, the Burmese had not been considered Ayutthaya's 'rival' (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2014: 21). Before the concept of nationalism was introduced to Thai elites, battles were regarded solely as a 'means to gain human resources, as well as, intellectual resources' (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2014: 22). In fact, the Burmese invasion in 1547 was considered 'healthy' to the kingdom, as it ended the power struggle between the Uthong and Suvarnabhumi dynasties (Chongkittavorn, 2008: 91). The Second and last fall of Ayutthaya Kingdom in 1767 inspired negative sentiments among Thais toward the Burmese invaders. Nevertheless, in the new Chakri Dynasty (1782-present), Thais occupied themselves building the new capital city, Bangkok. Most importantly, during the Chakri Dynasty new, non-Burmese 'threats' emerged. Thailand was threatened by colonial powers, the British and the French (Wyatt, 1991:97). In fact, from 1820 onward, there have not been any true wars between Thailand and Burma (Wyatt, 1991).

The myth of 'evil' Burma was created in 1868, the year King Chulalongkorn started his modernisation project. In King Chulalongkorn's attempt to create an official version of Thai Nationalism, or 'Thai-ness' ('Khwampenthai'), he took the Burmese into account, using them to help define 'what is not Thai' (Chachavalpongpun, 2005: 1). Indeed, his brother, Prince Damrong, wrote the first 'official' Thai history. In Prince Damrong's 'Travelling inside Burma' (1894), the prince described the Burmese leaders as 'corrupt and selfish', and as lacking leadership abilities (Musikawong, 2008: 715), while proclaiming Burma 'a symbol of failure for being unable to combat the forces of colonisation' (Chachavalpongpun, 2005: 83). According to Chachavalpongpun, the 'sensational story' of Thai-Burmese relationship is so 'successful' that 'it sets in stone the negative perception toward Burmese among Thai people' (Chachavalpongpun, 2005: 34).

With the threat of communism, the rivalry between Thailand and Burma is limited not only within written texts but also within feature films, which act as the 'invisible hand against communism' (Day & Liem, 2010: 195). As Dissanayke argues, cinema is an 'important mode of communication for constructing an imagined community', as cinema can reach 'both literate and illiterate group[s] in the nation' (Quoted. in Sungsri, 2008: 4). Under General Phibun Songkarn's leadership from 1938 to 1957, over 26 feature films about Thai-Burmese war were made, as the General himself believed that 'war makes nations' (Day and Liem, 2010: 194).

Although theorists such as Pitsuwan and Phongpaichit see Thai-Burmese relations in a positive light, due to Thai support of the Burmese military government (as a member of the Association of South East Asia Nations, or ASEAN) in 1997, Burma's role as 'other' in obliquely defining Thai selfhood is still reinforced by General Chavalit. Indeed, the General stated, 'Thai-ness is [as] different from Burmese-ness as prosperity [is] from hardship, or as development [is] from backwardness' (Quoted. In Chachavlapongpun, 2005: 127). General Chavalit's successor, Chuan Leekphai, is even more obvious in his attempt to expand Thai-ness into Burma. In 1997, Chuan initiates the 'Flexible Engagement Policy' (Chachavlapongpun, 2005: 145), allowing the Thai government to expand 'Thai morality' into Burma, hence reinforcing the 'cultural superiority of Thai race' (Chachavlapongpun, 2005: 145).

By looking at the historical context of Thai-Burmese relations, we see that Thai nationalists consistently play an important role in creating the mythic discourse of the Burmese. The role of Burmese as 'the other' to Thai selfhood is reinforced throughout history. By using visual semiotics, this study aims to deconstruct the mythic representation of the Burmese in

contemporary Thai cinema, and pinpoint how such a myth could be related to Thai nationalism.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

In this chapter, my theoretical and conceptual framework is outlined, rationale of the study is explained, and, the objective of this study is stated.

Literature Review

ASEAN secretary Surin Pitsuwan predicted that in the next five years, as ASEAN rises in power, the South East Asia region will fuse into 'one community' with a common goal of creating economic growth without any political intervention (Chachavalpongpun, 2005: 125). In 1996, Appadurai already argued that the modern nation-state would be placed in 'serious crisis brought by transnational condition' (Appadurai, 1996). But, does the decline of the nation-state mean that people just stop 'being English or Irish or Jewish, as occasion demands?' (Hobsbawm, 1987: 192) Indeed, Tomlinson and Ignatieff argue that our exposure to global phenomena could evoke a stronger and more passionate sense of nationalism (Tomlinson, 1999; Ignatieff, 1994). In other words, 'the distant other' reinforce a clearer binary opposition between us and them (Tomlinson, 1994).

Ethno-Symbolism, Imagined Community, and Myth

If nationalism persists, the next question we must ask is how nationalism can work to unite people from different classes, races, etc., into a 'welded unity?' (Hobsbawm, 198:, 191) Different theorists provide us with different explanations of how nationalism and our identification to the 'national family' are made (Hobsbawm, 1987: 191). One approach for evaluating nationalism is that of the ethno-symbolist, as provided by Anthony Smith (Smith, 1995). According to Smith, the nation is not entirely an invention of European modernity (Smith, 1995). Rather, Smith's ethno-symbolist model is to define nationalism as 'a product of an almost primordial ethnic: shared ethnicity, assorted tradition, historical experiences, language and other common antecedents' (Smith, 1995: 78). Adopting an ethno-symbolist model to analyse Thai nationalism, Strum argues that it is 'pre-modern elements,' such as Buddhism, that constitute the Thai modern concept of nationalism (Young, et al. , 2007: 117).

A second approach of examining nationalism is through the lens of Benedict Anderson's concept of nation as imagined community (Anderson, 1991). For Anderson, a nation is imagined because it is 'both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson, 1991: 6). Anderson

refers to nationalism as 'the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist' (Anderson, 1991: 5). Unlike Smith, Anderson argues that the nation is a rather new invention of European modernity (Anderson, 1991); it came into existence because of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment destroyed the dynastic realm, encouraged more secular thinking, gave rise to the invention of the printing press, and popularized print capitalism (Anderson, 1991). In turn, these events led to the proliferation of vernacular language, and thus created a 'profound emotional legitimacy' among people in the community (Anderson, 1991: 4). Lastly, Anderson defines nation as a 'community' since 'regardless of actual inequality and exploitation …the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 1991: 7).

Gellner takes Anderson's thinking a step further, suggesting that a nation is not only an invention, but also a 'fabrication' (Gellner, 1983: 56). For Gellner, nationalism is defined as 'essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority …of the population' (Gellner, 1983: 57). Nationalism is 'the enforcement of order' through the use of ideologies (Gellner, 1983: 56). Ideology itself is defined as a 'false idea or systemically distorted communication, which helps to legitimise a dominant power through production of meaning, signs, and values in social life' (Eagleton, 1991: 18). Indeed, for Gellner, nationalism is fabricated to cope with modern industrialism since 'the modern economy needs substitutable and thus mobile people on a large scale, it needs all people to be specialised but to move between specialisations' (Gellner, 1983: 52). Mass education not only prepares citizens for the workforce, but also offers an ideal institution for injecting nationalist ideology (Gellner, 1983).

Although Thai nationalism is a result of colonial threat rather than modern industrialism, Connors suggests that Thai nationalism is 'an ideological resource of the ruling elite' (Connors, 2006: 524). It is 'fabricated to create a nationally identifying citizenry that can be mobilised for productive purposes' (Connors, 2006: 524). King Vajiravudh (1880-1925) created the official and hegemonic version of Thai nationalism, defining the three principles of Thai-ness as: 'Chat, Satsana, and Phramahakasat' or 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy', accordingly (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014). These three essences of Thai-ness cannot be teased apart, and monarchy is considered the glue that holds the principles together (Vella, 1978). King Vajiravudh's version of Thai-ness is to suggest that the monarchy is the most important essence of Thai nationalism. This is to ensure that the citizens of Thailand 'will forever be loyal to their monarch' (Connors, 2006: 524).

Aligning with Gellner's argument, the third approach to nationalism is Michael Billing's concept of banal nationalism. Billing argues, 'the notion of nation and nation as imagination

is not enough' (Billing, 1995: 26). To Billing, there are infinite ways of imagining national community, rather than the clear and objective criteria that Anderson suggests (Billing, 1995). After its establishment, nationalism is 'not a finished project' (Billing, 1995: 26). Anderson's imagined community failed to address the mechanisms responsible for maintaining nationalism. To maintain our sense of nationalism, Billing suggests, the banality of everyday life proves the most effective interpellator of the nationalist ideologies (Billing, 1995). Similarly, Giddens states that it is 'common-sense-discourse' that makes 'monopolisation of violence appear natural to us' (Quoted. In Eyerman, 2009: 69). The mundane act of everyday life 'dehistoricises mythic assumption' of nationalism into banal thought (Barthes, 2013). Barthes points out the myth he observed represented on the cover of Paris-Match magazine, where it features a French-Nigerian boy saluting the French Flag. Barthes points out the mythic message of the image; 'That France is a great empire and all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag' (Barthes, 2013: 45). In this way, 'myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us' (Barthes, 2013: 45).

National Identity and the 'Significant' Other

> 'The opponent of nationalism see it as a dangerously effective tool of persuasion; to accept that the good of nation is pre-eminent is also to accept the possibility of subordination to that good' (Turner, 1988, 157).

If it is ideology that constitutes nationalism, rather than a dominant ethnicity, then how did our national identity come into existence? Theorists, such as Awan and Gauntlett, still stress the significance of race and ethnicity as 'a marker of identity' (Awan, and Gauntlett, 2011: 360). However, Stuart Hall would argue that race itself is 'a floating signifier' (Hall, 1992: 161). In conceptualising identity, Hall divides a person subjectively into three concepts: 'enlightenment subject, sociological subject, and post-modern subject' (Hall, 1992: 161). For the Enlightenment subject, identity is individualist, prescribed, and fixed. We are born with an inner core that 'essentially remains the same throughout our life-time' (Hall, 1992: 161). On the other hand, 'the post-modern subject is conceptualised as having no permanent or essential identity' (Hall, 1992: 161). Most importantly, the concept of the sociological subject argues that our identity is always constructed in relation to difference, or the 'significant other, who mediated to the subject the value, meaning, symbols, and cultures' (Hall, 1992: 161).

The process of categorisation is crucial as the imagining of 'us' is always involved with the imaging of 'them' (Billing, 1995). Indeed, Bourdieu argues, it is this process of categorisation, which enables 'the construction of what is commonly designated as national identity'

(Bourdieu, 1994: 7). 1). Our sense of national identification is 'never simply a relationship to the Other' based upon racial difference; it is a relationship to the Other mediated by the intervention of the state' (Balibar, 1991 ; 15).

Yet, Hall's three concepts of identity do not suggest that the other needs to be negative. Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, then, suggests that, in order to effectively create group identification and national identity, 'positive aspects' are needed to create a 'strong motivational theme' (Tajfel, 1982: 11). That is, 'an individual will tend to remain a member of a group if these group[s] have some contribution to make the positive aspects of his social identity' (Tajfel, 1982: 256). But, to create such positive contributions, a negative comparison to others is required (Tajfel, 1982). 'Other nations deemed inferior is now needed to create a motivation for national identification' (Tajfel, 1981: 256). 'National characters are nothing more than bundles of stereotype[s]' (Bourdieu, 1994: 4). An entire group of people is reduced into a 'few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped, and widely recognised traits' in order to create the sense that we, as a nation, are better than them (Hall, 1997: 258).

Three Grammars of 'Othering' and Identity

Although I agree with Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, the binary opposition between good and bad/us and them is too simplistic, as it suggests that national identity is 'a [n] either-or process by which you either choose to be us or them'(Baumann, & Gingrich, 2006: 5). Baumann and Gingrich urge us to move away from dichotomies, as this othering provides 'a weak notion of differences' (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006: 5). In lieu of such dichotomies, they proffer the three Grammars of Identity: the grammars of orientalism, segmentation, and encompassment.

The first grammar is based on Edward Said's concept of orientalism, which is 'remarkable for its double-edged play between exclusion and exoticised appreciation' (Baumann& Gingrich, 2006: 25). According to Said, the Orient is the product of a discursive imagination, based upon binary opposition between the primitive East, and the modern West (Said, 1995). As Said states, 'Orientalism was the discourse by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively…' (Said, 1995: 6).

However, Baumann and Gingrich argue that the binary opposition between the East and the West 'is not limited to: the West is so good, the East is so bad' (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006 ; 20). Firstly, not only by the West, but also the East can reproduce the binary opposition. As Yan and Santos assert, the East can also 'self-orientalise' and exoticise itself (Yan & Santos, 2009: 295). This is what Yan and Santos called self-orientalism, which illustrates that the

East is still 'subjugated to Western understanding and authority over modernity' (Yan & Santos, 2009: 295). Secondly, the Orient also has positive features in orientalist grammar, with language such as 'spontaneous, luxuriant, and mystical' making appearances alongside the more negative features like 'irrational, superstitious, and backward' (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006: 20). These characteristics, however, express a paternalistic sense, 'a discrimination without violence' (Novo, 2003: 260). That is, constructing the Orient as 'likeable does not mean a true equity' (Novo, 2003: 260).

Based on Pritchard's 1940 study of the lineage system in the Nuer, the second grammar is segmentation (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006). The grammar of segmentation is notable for its 'contextuality' (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006). The Nuer's lineage system is shaped like a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid, they all identify themselves as members of a Nuer clan (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006), but at the lower level of the pyramid, they might identify themselves differently. Othering of identity amongst the Nuer depends on certain contexts, as Baumann and Gingrich suggest, 'While in the context of linage-level blood feud a Nuer must 'other an implicated neighbour to the point of threatening a revenge killing, the same neighbour is an ally in the context of clan-level conflict, or a threat of colonial conquest' (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006: 21). This is to say, someone who is deemed as 'other' could be deemed as friend in a later context.

The third grammar is that of encompassment: 'an act of selfing by appropriating, perhaps one should say co-opting, selected kind of otherness' (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006: 25). While women are defined in contrast to men, 'both woman and men are considered encompassable parts of mankind' (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006: 25). Although encompassment may imply the possibility of 'racial mixture and inclusion,' encompassment could also lead to exclusion (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006). Skimore's study of Brazil's branqueamento, or 'whitening politics' is a good example (Quoted in Baumann & Gingrich, 2006) of this. Seemingly, branqueamento celebrates interracial mixing and racial differences, but looking at its history, it becomes clear that its proponents, the elites of Brazil, actually support it due to notions of white superiority (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006). Advocates of branqueamento support interracial marriage because interracial marriage would lead to progressively lighter-skinned offspring, eventually 'whitening' the darker race (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006).

Cinema: Transnational or National Medium?

Dissanayke states that cinema plays an essential role in fostering 'our emotional identification to the nation' (Dissanayke, 1994: 9). Cinema could 'visualise and unify national narratives linking the past, present, and the future' (Dissanayke, 1994: 9). Nevertheless, Alan

Williams argues that, at its dawn, cinema is perceived to be 'a truly transnational medium' (Williams, 2002: 25). As Anderson argues, the vernacular and national language plays an important role in 'interpolating' one into national citizens. Here, it is the use of national speech that seems to be missed from early cinema. As Williams states, 'national barriers would definitely arrive only with (recorded) speech' (Williams, 2002: 25). In Thai cinema, however, even before the arrival of sound, film was 'considered tools or weapons to achieve political aims and to protect the nation. It has the ability to shape and limit public discourse of Thai-ness' (Chongkittavorn, 2008 ; 18). In fact, the first Thai film is a documentary-style film, which records the public activities of King Chulalongkorn and was made by his younger brother, Prince Sanphasat Supakit (Sungsri, 2004). Alighting with Dissanayke, Thai cinema is explicably linked to nationalism (Sungsri, 2004).

Evaluating National Cinema: Indigenous Art or Ideological Tool?

In defending national cinema, theorists have different approaches. Williams defines it in terms of its production. National cinema is cinema that is against the Hollywood model. Or, to be more specific, a national cinema is 'European and Third world entertainment cinema that struggles against Hollywood with limited or no success' (Williams, 2002: 27). This is also to limit national cinema to art cinema (Stam, and Shohat, 1994). In contrast to Williams, Andrew Higson evaluates national cinema from a 'consumption-based' perspective (Higson, 1989: 36). This approach requires 'an understanding [of] audiences [sic: such as] tastes, interests, age and education, [which] set the direction for the content and style of national cinema' (Higson, 1989: 36). Applying the consumption-based approach to Thai cinema, Sungsri argues that Thai cinema often films on real locations—the countryside in particular—to target audiences by 'creating identification and sense of belonging to national territory' (Sungsri, 2004: 27). Michael T. Martin, however, defines national cinema using a text-based approach (Martin, 1995). National cinema 'signifies its nation-essence' and embodies the indigenous aesthetic of its country (Martin, 1995: 9). Using Martin's approach, films that have indigenous elements such as 'Khon' ('traditional drama dance'), 'Likay' ('Thai folk drama'), and 'Chakchak Wongwong' ('Thai Fairly Tales'), would thus be considered as national Thai cinema (Sungsri, 2004: 29). Yet, the argument is, why certain art films, which feature Buddhist monks, the essence of Thai-ness, and employ Khon in its storytelling, were banned under Thailand's 1936 censorship (Chongkittavorn, 2008). Apichatpong's 'Syndromes and a Century' (2006), for example, is banned because the film is 'not compromising to the officialdom of Thai-ness, namely Buddhism, and the Monarchy' (Chongkittavorn, 2008: 19).

National Cinema as 'Dominant Fiction'

Instead of evaluating national cinema for its production values, consumer-target, and aesthetic elements, Graeme Turner argues that we should 'think of national cinema as a product of its ideological outcome' (Turner, 1988,: 179). National cinema is a cinema that expresses and maintains both national identity and nationalism (Burgoyne, 2008; Hjort & Mackenzie, 2000; Turner, 1988). To Burgoyne, films have the ability to create what Jacques Ranciere has called 'the dominant fiction' (Quoted in Burgoyne, 2008: 17). The dominant fiction is 'the ideological reality or image of social consensus within which members of a society are asked to identify themselves' (Quoted in Burgoyne, 2008: 17). Instead of giving a 'truthful and detached account' (Smith, 2001: 42), national cinema works to reproduce dominant ideology as 'the filmmaker is only a bricoleur, a handyman who does the best she or he can with the material at hand' (Turner, 1988: 182). Indeed, Abrash and Walkowitz argue, films 'disrupt the conventional way of retelling the past' (Abrash and Walkowitz, 1994, 205). 'Films reflect the particular historical moment in which they were made, and stand as a historical commentary on the discourse of power shaping that particular historical moment' (Abrash & Walkowitz, 1994: 205). To read national cinema from an ideological approach, is to see 'how national cinema effectively construct[s] reality in order to express, support, and maintain, a particular ideological worldview and beliefs of nationalism' (Burgoyne, 2008: 12). Indeed, as Turner argues, the ideology of nationalism is changed from time to time, but the function of national cinema remains the same; 'it maintain[s] the statutes quo' (Tuner, 1988: 177).

Resonating with Turner's evaluation of the ideological aspect of national cinema, Matthew Alford contends that Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, which was originally suggested for news media, could apply to the ideological output of films as well (Alford, 2010). In this model, there are five filters, which include 'concentrated ownership; the importance of merchandising; dependence on establishment sources; the disproportionate ability of the powerful to create flak; and a dominant ideology of us versus the other' (Alford, 2010: 3). The model emphasises the structure of the media to explain why it produces 'politically and culturally conservative material (Alford, 2010: 3). Nevertheless, the fifth filter stresses the significance of ideology as it argues that 'anti-other' ideologies act as 'a control mechanism' (Alford, 2010: 6). Chomsky himself states that otherness is an essential part of dominant ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Chomsky propounds, 'It's the idea that grave enemies are about to attack us and we need to huddle together under the protection of domestic power' (Quoted in Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 41).

Thai cinema often uses the process of othering as a means of reinforcing the dominant ideology of nationalism. For example, during 1960s, Thailand became 'Americanised'. The othering of communism is clear and evident in Thai films (Lewis, 2003; Day & Liem, 2010). Chomsky states that because communism is a 'fuzzy concept,' it is considered to be the 'ultimate evil' (Chomsky, 2003: 41). That is, 'communism could be used against anyone advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodations with Communist states and radicalism' (Chomsky, 2003: 41). In fact, Harrison writes, films such as 'Ai Yam Dang' (1971), 'Sombat' (1973), and 'Nak Phea-Din' (1975) are all in 'support of ideological rightist values, according to which those who chose to be communists could not be embraced as truly Thai' (Quotedin Day & Liem, 2010: 206).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To approach Burmese representation in contemporary Thai cinema, the conceptual framework is built upon a theoretical review. Essentially, in this research, we built an argument based on three concepts: nationalism, the grammar of othering, and ideological approach to national cinema. We first built our approach upon the concept of nationalism on Smith's primordial ethnic model, which emphasises ethnicity as well as shared myth and tradition. Rather than take a standard approach, we evaluate nationalism as an imagined community. It is perceived to be 'an ideological movement for attainment and independence on the behalf of a group' (Smith, 1983: 8). What binds us as national collectives, Billing would argue, is the mundane that creeps into ideology and interpolates us into national community. This historically transforms the specific ideology of nationalism into myth.

Still, such an approach to nationalism does not explain the significant role of the Burmese. In other words, it lacks an explanation as to why the Burmese play such a significant role in Thai nationalism. To formulate such an explanation, we first built our argument on Tajfel's Social Identity Theory and Hall's three concepts of the subject, which both argue that the 'other' plays a significant role in creating national identification (Tajfel, 1982; Hall, 1992; Billing 1995). To identify the process of 'othering' in a more dynamic and complex way, we employ Baumann and Gingrich's Three Grammars of Identity and 'Othering,' which include Said's Orientalism, segmentation, and encompassment. If we concede that the Burmese are being othered in Thai cinema, then what grammars does it fall into? For instance, if the Burmese representation falls into Said's Orientalism, does this simply mean that Thai cinema assigns negative traits to Burmese characters in the name of Thai nationalism? Or, if Thai cinema assigns them positive traits, does it simply indicate equality? Lastly, using Turner's

ideological approach and Arnold's fifth filter, we explore how national cinema helps promote and naturalise the respective dominant ideologies of Burmese and Thai nationalism.

Research Questions and Objectives

Although plenty of published literature evaluates both the ways in which globalisation reinforces a stronger sense of Thai-ness and the Burmese's role in constructing Thai-ness, so far no research has provided us with an understanding of how the Burmese are represented visually, and how this could connect to Thai nationalism. Film is a powerful ideological tool for presenting a particular version of reality; as such, our main objective in conducting this research is to learn how one could better harness that tool. What, then, does the 'reality' of the Burmese Thai film constitute, and what are its aims? Thus, I entitled my research 'The Unmasking of Burmese Myth in Contemporary Thai Cinema'.

This research will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways are Burmese characters represented in contemporary Thai cinema?

2. In what ways does contemporary Thai cinema play a role in 'othering' the Burmese characters?

3. In contemporary Thai cinema, what myths do Burmese characters create or reinforce?

4. In what ways do these respective myths about the Burmese connect to the ideologies of Thai nationalism?

METHODOLOGY

In this section, we justify method for research; explain sample selection, as well as, the operation of the method.

Justification of Method: Semiotics

In this research, we are interested in how the cultural meaning of the Burmese is created through representation, and how it later turns into myth. Representation, to Stuart Hall, 'means using language and signs to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people' (Quoted in Hall et al., 1996: 76). In this way, photography and film, 'using images to communicate [a] visual message,' are also considered a 'representational system' (Hall, 1997: 1).

In conceptualising representation, we employ three approaches: reflective, intentional, and constructionist (Hall, 1997). The reflective approach argues that a meaning lies in the actual object and person, while the intentional approach suggests that meanings are made according to the speakers' or writers' intention (Hall, 1997). The constructionist approach suggests otherwise, claiming that representation constructs our sense of social reality (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). Indeed, as Gillian Rose states, 'the visual representation is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies' (Rose, 2001: 22). 'Seeing is often associated with knowing' (Sontag, 1993).

To develop a greater understanding of the nature of shared social meaning, semiotics, which greatly influenced the constructionist approach, will be the method used in this research project (Hall, 1997). To fully understand the concept of semiotics, we will first discuss the work of Swiss Linguist, Ferdinand Saussure. In an attempt to discover how meaning is created linguistically, Saussure employs a structuralist approach. He wants to find 'the underlying master-rules and conventions of language' (Stam, 2000: 18). Saussure contributes to the study of semiotics in two main ways. First, he suggests that the production of meaning depends on two elements; the signified and the signifier, which Saussure defines as the 'idea' and the 'concept,' respectively (Hall et al., 1996: 133). For instance, once you hear or see the signifier 'pig,' this signifier would trigger the corresponding concept of 'pig' in your mind. Secondly, Saussure suggests that 'the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary' (Hall, 1997: 16). That is, the word 'pig' does not possess the essence of the actual pig. Signs have no fixed meaning in and of themselves (Stam, 2000).

Saussure faces a great deal of criticism (Hall, 1997), mainly because he treats language as a 'mere transparent medium' from which to provide 'social fact' (Hall, 1997: 13). That is, once we see the signifier, we all interpret it in same way, regardless of our race, class, and gender, while in reality, our status greatly impacts how we form meaning (Berger, 2008). More importantly, Saussure's work limits semiotics to linguistics. It is not until Roland Barthes's 'Myth Today' that semiotics is applied to see both how language works, and how cultures derive meanings from various sources. This is Barthes' first contribution to semiotics—applying it to a wider signifying system. 'Any culturally-shaped utterance—from wearing clothes to choice of an entree in a meal—presupposed a system (of fashion, cuisine, or language) generating the possibilities of social meanings' (Stam, 2000: 20).

More importantly is Barthes' second contribution, his assertion that signs are ideological (Moriarty, 1991). 'Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. Everything ideological possesses a semiotic value' (Voloshinov, 1973: 10). Rather than concern himself with the 'universal binaries' of signs, Barthes weighs how meaning is culturally and socially created

through signs (Strinati, 2004: 109). Barthes investigates how a certain value or ideology surpasses others through the use of signs. For Barthes, ideology is defined as the imposition of dominant values and beliefs of a particular group through 'mystification' which is the process of 'masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions' (Eagleton, 1991: 6).

In deconstructing such ideological myths, Barthes argues that signs work on two levels: denotation, and connotation. Denotation is 'the first layer of meaning' (Leeuwen, and Jewitt, 2001, 94). Denotation is what is being depicted. Connotation, on the other hand, is the 'underlying message[s] signs may contain' (Moriarty, 1991, 12). Connotation deals with 'what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented and through the way it is represented' (Leeuwen, and Jewitt, 2001, 94). Most importantly, Barthes argues that ideological connotation works to favour bourgeois ideology, making it appear 'seemingly natural' and becomes the 'inevitable way' of comprehending our social lives (Barthes, 2013: 49).

Three key theorists dominate semiotics in film, Umberto Eco, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Christian Mezt (Burgoyne, 2000). Pasolini argues that the objects or people on-screen possess a 'natural' value (Lapsley & Westlake, 1988: 43). Similarly, Carroll argues that not necessarily every action and scene is ideological (Carroll, 1996). For example, 'the innate human tendency to jump…could be said to be, in [a] certain aspect, beyond politics and ideology' (Carroll, 1996: 56). In contrast to Pasolini, Eco argues that every action and object on-screen are 'are inextricably imbricated with convention, code, system, and, by extension, ideology.' (Quoted in Lapsley & Westlake, 1988: 43). Similar to Eco, Mezt suggests that every cinematic unit in film is a sign, which constitutes a larger part of film 'language' (Mezt, 1974: 4). The so-called language of a film works to constitute reality, rather than simply reflect one (Quoted in Lapsley & Westlake, 1988: 42). Indeed, 'the specific function of cinema is to maintain [the] ace of bourgeois idealism' (Stam, 2000: 18).

In this research, I will investigate the representation of Burmese characters in contemporary Thai cinema by using semiotics as a research method, and examine how Thai cinema 'represents' or constructs the reality of Burmese characters. Further, I will investigate just what myths about the Burmese, Thai cinema aims to normalise. I agree with Eco and Mezt; film not only has semiological aspects, and its own language, but it also works to promote and naturalise the dominant ideology. Barthian semiotics will be used to operationalise samples and discuss research findings.

Sample and Data Collection

In using semiotics, we are interested in both how the texts are organised in 'their own right', and in how dominant ideology is naturalised in the film's texts (Leeuwen, and Jewitt, 2001). For a visual-qualitative analysis, choosing data that is 'conceptually interesting' is the most significant part (Rose, 2001: 58). For this research, we are interested in Burmese representation in contemporary Thai cinema. Thus, in collecting film samples, I selected them based on two criteria: genre and release year.

First of all, the genre of film is taken into account because 'a particular genre will share a specific set of meaningful objects and ways of showing them' (Rose, 2001: 12). For example, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam suggest that Western genres rely on 'a highly polarised binary opposition' (Shohat & Stam, 1994,:109). Shohat and Stam also state that such binary opposition 'persists…even in revisionist, pro-Indian' (or pro-Arab) films' with the result that stories are told from the perspective of the powerful' (Shohat & Stam, 1994: 109). This makes Western genres reinforce the same ideological connotations of white superiority (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Moreover, different Thai film productions specialise in different genres. For instance, Sahamongkol Film specialises in epic war and action films (Ingawanij, 2005). By selecting films from different genres, we will see whether different genres reinforce the same ideology or not.

Secondly, in accordance with the title's designation of 'contemporary', we select the most recent Thai films with Burmese characters. Shohat, Stam, and Sungsri state that the category of contemporary film usually refers to films released from the 1980s onward (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Sungsri, 2004). As mentioned, we are using semiotics to analyse the data; hence, we are not interested in comparing differences or similarities of Burmese representation in Thai cinema across time. Rather, we are interested in the present-day Thai films, which claim to 'offer a better understanding of ASEAN countries' (Day & Liem, 2010: 194).

As a result of these criteria, we have selected three films. They are 'Makli' (2011), 'the Legend of King Naresuan 5' (2014), and 'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok' (2014), which were made by GMM Grammy, Sahamongkol Film, and Tannud Film, respectively.

Research Operation

Semiotics is a textual approach that aims to generate as many details as possible (Leeuwen, & Jewitt, 2001). In film, 'denotation itself is being constructed, organised, and to a certain extent codified' (Quoted in Metz, 1974,: 77). Everything in the cinematic frame has both denotative and connotative meanings (Mezt, 1974). Thus, I scope my analysis according to

cinematic elements that are considered 'significant' (Stam, 2000: 39), including lighting, shot size, clothes, and colour tone (Stam, 2000). Editing and sound, both digesis, and non-digesis, are not taken into semiotic analysis since I decided to focus on still images. After all, in cinema, images are 'the key factor in guiding our perception of the action' (Bordwell, 1997: 293). Three key images will be taken from the first and last scene featuring Burmese characters (Dutt, 2013). Altogether, I will analyse 18 still images semiotically. In doing so, I will be able to compare similarities and differences between the first and last scene (Dutt, 2013). Ultimately, in making these comparisons, I will determine whether there are changes in the mythic connotation of the Burmese characters (Dutt, 2013).

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

'Makli' (See Appendix 1)

'Makli' Image 1, Scene 1

Denotatively, on the bottom left of the image, we see Makli's hand using a feather duster to clean a house decoration. In the image, we see two ostensibly Buddhist statues. These statues feature details indicating Buddhism, such as heads and chests displaying orientalist ornamentation. The lighting in the scene is a cool-temperature lighting. The cool-temperature lighting in GMM Grammy's film is often used in horror or films to create a sense of darkness (Lewis, 2003).

The most emphasised element of these images is the Buddhist statues. The statues connote one of the three essences of Thai-ness; i.e., religion. Religion—Buddhism in particular—becomes one of three core tenets of Thai nationalism because 'It aims to call forth loyalty and commitment to the nation, to ensure identity between people and the nation, and to provide a common religious belief that excludes nonbelievers' (Connors, 2006: 524). The placing of the Buddhist statues is an interesting way of expressing an ideological connotation of Thai-ness. Peter Jackson argues that, while industrialisation is the main force for European countries to create a sense of nationalism, in Thailand, it 'was the threat of foreign domination in the nineteenth century that compelled Siamese elites to develop modern conceptions of proto national culture' (Quoted in Connors, 2006: 524). Placing the Buddhist statues into a foreigner's residence is to connote that all people, regardless of race, can embody and appreciate the essence of Thai-ness. This, then, reminds us of Billing's concept of banal nationalism. Nationalism works best on the basis of everyday in which we do not think twice about ideological interpellation.

*'Makli' Image 2, Scene 1*While in the first image we can identity neither the race nor the gender of the character; here we can clearly see that the figure is a woman, Makli. She is in the kitchen, as we can tell from the kitchen fixtures and appliances, such as the red refrigerator and the sink. Makli's presence in the kitchen, a domestic space, not only carries gender connotations that fix women to the domestic space, but also the ideological connotation of nationalism (Khan, 2009). As Khan argues, Indian cinema is a 'nationalist project' because while the narrative 'idealises [the] upper class Hindu male,' women in film are either in a domestic space or threatened with sexual violence from Muslim men (Khan, 2009; 86). This is because women perform a nationalist function. Women 'regulates' the Muslim man 'either by domesticating him or by killing him' (Khan, 2009: 86). This is, perhaps, to foreshadow Makli's actions toward the end of the story: upon becoming a ghost, she kills her Thai male Boss.

'Makli' Image 3, Scene 1

Moving our attention to the third image, we see Makli with her neighbour. Their appearances are rather similar. They are both Asian women with light skin and black hair. On the right is Makli, holding a white box. Perhaps, this denotes that the woman on the left side gave Makli the white box, suggesting some kind of relationship between the two women.

Moreover, the appearance of Makli in this image implies an interesting ideological connotation. First of all, white skin is part of the traditional Thai concept of beauty, called 'Benchakanlayani' (Chaisingkananont, 2001: 7). The concept refers to 'five features of supreme beauty' which is 'the most predominant concept since [the] Ayutthaya period' (Chaisingkananont, 2001: 7). Moreover, white skin connotes the skin of the upper middle class (Chaisingkananont, 2001). In contrast to dark skin, white skin connotes that a person is born into a 'good family' and does not have to do manual labour (Chaisingkananont, 2001). Makli is a Burmese maid, yet her appearance is not distinct from her neighbour. In fact, at denotative level, we could not know that two of them had different nationalities. Visually, this could connote use of Baumann and Gingrich's third grammar of inclusion or encompassment, indicating that Thai and Burmese people are actually alike (Baumann & Gingrich, 2006).

'Makli' Image 1, Scene 2

In this image, we see Makli's feet, which bear a blood strain. We also see that the skirt she wears features a traditional floral pattern. Because the camera crops out her upper body, we cannot see what is happening or make out the scene's setting. The lighting of the camera is dark due to under-exposure, a technique often employed to create suspense and foreshadow (Stam, 2000). Judging from the bloodstain and the dark lighting, we believe that something

bad is happening to Makli (i.e., Makli). Moreover, the use of a traditional floral skirt orientalises Makli by assigning a 'traditional' aspect to her dress. Clothes are not just a 'superficial layer' to our identities; rather, they are 'a sign of identity' (Tapp 2004: 137). Clothes play an important symbolic role in 'differentiating' various national identities (Miller, 2000: 12).

'Makli' Image 2, Scene 2

In image 2, the camera has tracked up to Makli's upper half. Although this image is captured using a close-up shot, Makli's face is obscured. In fact, the entire image is blurry. We see that Makli is sitting on some kind of box. The under-exposed lighting continues to be used. The blurriness of the image connotes obscurities, as we do not know what has happened to Makli. From the previous image and overall setting in this image, we can infer that Makli is dead.

'Makli' Image 3, Scene 2

This image confirms that Makli is, indeed, dead. But, what ideological connotations can we infer from her death? On one hand, horror films express our 'universal basic repression', which develops throughout our lifetimes as we interpolated various institutions to better fit into society (Wood, 2012: 98). In psychoanalysis, the concept of otherness is 'closely linked to the concept of repression' (Wood, 2012). 'Otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognise or accept but must deal with in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself' (Wood, 2012: 97).

On the other hand, Valerie Wee argues that horror films perform a nationalist function as well. 'Horror films articulate the specific fears of a nation/community and reveal the socio-cultural, political, and ideological failures and instabilities that shape a nation/culture's historical zeitgeist' (Wee 2014: 8). Ghosts are used to refer to 'those who have no one to worship them, particularly those who die violent deaths. Without proper burial and worship, ghosts inherently contain death pollution that is a source of danger' (Li, 2009: 672). Ghosts have a liminal status since they transgress 'classification in social structure' (Douglas, 1966: 75). Ghosts, thus, 'become signifiers of ambiguity, disorder, and pollution' (Douglas, 1966: 75). Here, Makli not only transgresses psychologically as a ghost, an ambivalent juxtaposition of living and dead, but also, as a Burmese maid, she transgresses the imagined boundaries of Thai selfhood.

Overall 'Makli' Scene 1 and Scene 2

In the first scene, we saw one of the three essences of Thai nationalism represented, vis-á-vis the Buddhist statue shown as Makli cleaned. While the Buddhist statue might have nationalist connotations, we did not find Makli being 'othered' in the first scene. From the

third image of the first scene, we can see that Makli and her neighbour's appearance are rather similar, echoing Baumann and Gingrich's grammar of encompassment. However, in the second scene Makli is dead. The interpretation of Makli's death can be explained in two ways. First, because 'Makli' is a horror film that expresses our repression in various forms, the death of Makli, thus, could be interpreted as a work of the horror genre. The liminal status of ghosts serves as expressions of our universal repressed desire that runs counter to our senses of nationalism. The second explanation is that, as Wee argues, horror films could act as expressions of our communal and national fears. An alternative interpretation is that Makli not only transgresses the physical realm/natural world in the form of a ghost, but as Burmese maid, she also transgresses the imagined community of Thailand.

'The Legend of King Naresuan 5' (See Appendix 2)

'The Legend of King Naresuan 5,' Image 1, Scene 1

Denotatively, in the centre, we see a man wearing golden armour. He is the king of Burma, Nawrahta Minsaw. On his left, we see a 'Gadha' or a mace. On his right, we see a table with some sort of decoration on it. These decorations are comprised of a 'Shankha' ('Holy Conch'), a 'Modakapatra' ('A Bowl of Rice'), a 'Chhuri' ('A Dagger'), a 'Rudraksha Mala' ('A Karen Necklace'), and a Amritakumbha' ('A Bowl of Holy Water). According to the Buddhist chronicle text, 'Traiphumikhatha' (The Sermon of the Three Worlds), these are the 'Vitarka mudra' or the elements of Rama, the lord protector of Hinduism. Use of the wide shot enables us to see the entire setting in the image. The overall grandeur of the *mise en scène* is regarded as embodying 'the particular formal characteristics of the epic film' . This is to 'produce an affective and emotional relation to the historical past' (Burgoyne, 2008 ; 74).

Indeed, the use of 'Vitarka mudra' in this image is interesting, connotatively. First of all, the placement of the 'Vitarka mudra' alludes to comparisons between Nawrahta Minsaw and Rama. Further, it suggests that, as king, Nawrahta is the incarnation of the Lord Protector. Once again, this is to emphasise that the nation, monarchy, and religion are inextricably linked. Secondly, as Turner argues, the filmmaker is just a bricoleur who utilises the ideology of the present to tell the story of the past (Turner, 1988). Likewise, Mikhail Bakhtin writes, epic wars 'resume past usage . . . and redefine [the] present in an additional way' (Quoted in Burgoyne, 2008: 74). Before Rattanakosin, 'royal legitimacy did not appeal to any identity between king and god' (Eoseewong, 2005: 68). A king was thought of a 'father' to his citizens (Wyatt, 1984: 54). Because King Phutthayotfa Chulalok, the first king of Rattakkosin, was a commoner, he justified 'the change in blood line' and his power, by inventing the concept of King as the incarnation of Rama (Baker & Phonpaichit: 2014: 26). By declaring that the King is an incarnation of Rama, his bloodline becomes irrelevant.

'The Legend of King Naresuan 5,' Image 2, Scene 1

Denotatively, we see a man in sharp pointed armour in the foreground. This man is Minyekyawswa, a Burmese prince. In the background, we can see an ally of the Burmese soldier. The chaotic background denotes that they are in the battlefield. Minyekyawswa's amour and his soldiers' armour are similar in that they all had spiked elements. The amour of Minyekyawswa and his followers connotes an interesting message. First of all, in 'Histoire du Royaume de Siam' John Crawford asserts that, by the Ayutthaya period, Thai and Burmese soldiers alike were already sporting Western-style armour, such as the breastplate (Quoted in Panyasopon, 2006). This means that Thai and Burmese soldiers of the Ayutthaya period had similar armour to one another (Panyasopon, 2006). Nevertheless, Minyekyawswa's spiked armour is interesting because Sunait Chutintaranond, the costume designer of 'The Legend of King Naresuan,' states that the Burmese armour is a 'combination of both Laoya Burmese-style armour and armour of Ravana, the Lord of Giants in Ramayana' (Quoted in Panyasopon, 2006: 534). Ravana is considered the prime enemy of Rama. Here, the ideological connotation of Minyekyawswa and his soldiers donning such armour suggests that they are a threat to the Thai kingdom.

'The Legend of King Naresuan 5,' Image 3, Scene 1

In a close-up shot of Nawrahta Minsaw, we can see that Nawrahta Minsaw's armour is similar to that of Minyekyawswa. We can also clearly see the details on Nawrahta Minsaw's hat: on its front is some sort of symbolic decoration — the Garuda. The Garuda on Nawrahta Minsaw's hat has ideological connotation; in the Hindu myth, Garuda is the carrier of Rama, and as mentioned, the king is believed to be the incarnation of Rama in Rattanakosin Kingdom (Ayuthya, 1999). In this way, Garuda becomes the national emblem of Thailand and comes to represent the authority of the Thai monarchy (Ayuthya, 1999). 'Even today in modern Thailand, vehicles [sic: which] carry the king will have a depiction of the guard on the front' (Connors, 2006: 560). Here, we once again witness the fabrication of historical facts. Since Nawrahta Minsaw lived during the Ayutthaya period, this would mean that the connection of Garuda and the monarchy had not yet been established.

'The Legend of King Naresuan 5,' Image 1, Scene 2

Denotatively, in the foreground, we see two people using halberds to fight. In the background looms the vast ally of the chaotic army. The man on the left is Minyekyawswa, wearing a helmet with notable Nāgas on top. Similar to the Garuda on Nawrahta Minnow's hat, the Nāgas on top of Minyekyawswa's helmet bears ideological connotation; the Nāgas also play a significant part as 'a justification of the king having a sacred role' since the Nāgas were regarded as 'an essential symbol of matriarchy related to the king's noble lineage' (Tu, 2002: 5). This was based on the legend of a Khmer king who 'each night was expected to mate with

a nine-headed serpent princess to continue the royal lineage and ensure the prosperity of the kingdom' (Tu, 2002: 5). King Mongkut of the Rattanakosin Kingdom (1801-1865) later adopts the symbol of Nāgas to be regarded 'as the state protector of devout kings', as the king had over 200 wives (Tu, 2002: 5). The ideological connotation is, once again, that the monarchy is linked to God, and also serves to justify King Mongkut's polygamy.

Moreover, the man on the right, King Naresuan, is wearing a Western-style silver breastplate. This silver armour has ideological connotation. As previously discussed, although Thai and Burmese soldiers had already adopted Western-style breastplate armour, Minyekyawswa's armour is intended to resemble that of the Lord of the Giant (Panyasopon, 2006). This is to connote the practice of self-orientalism, as the Burmese prince is represented as somewhat more 'traditional' than the Thai ruler, who had already adopted Western-style armour. Indeed, to Thais, 'the Frarang (foreigners) way is considered the way of life' (Wyatt, 1984: 198).

'The Legend of King Naresuan 5,' Image 2, Scene 2

Denotatively, we see a close-up shot of Minyekyawswa. His facial expression is rather hard to decipher. His eyes are directed toward King Naresuan. However, his blank state and his gesture of bending his head could denote that he is low on energy. Still, this is the only image in the second scene of 'the Legend of King Naresuan 5' where the Burmese ruler is shown without the appearance of King Naresuan, the Thai ruler. The emphasis is on Minyekyawswa's facial expression. Unlike the other two images of second scene, the dichotomy between Thai and Burmese is not yet created.

'The Legend of King Naresuan 5,' Image 3, Scene 2

We now turn our attention to Minyekyawswa, who is actually bowing his head to King Naresuan. Since we see them fighting in the first images, this image could denote that Minyekyawswa is defeated by King Naresuan. We could also see that King Naresuan's hat is engraved with a Buddhist statue. This connotes that the king Naresuan is the protector of Buddhism. He intends to not only protect Thailand from Burma politically, but also religiously. King Naresuan's victory over Minyekyawswa is justified because he would have 'save[d] these people [the Burmese] from less perfectly Buddhist governance' (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005: 31). Indeed, the connotation of the Nāgas, as was previously addressed, also has a negative side. Nāgas will harm those who 'cause chaos and bring disaster to the states' (Tu, 2002: 7). Here, the ideological connotation is that by invading Ayutthaya, Minyekyawswa's action is unjust and he needs to be punished, whereas King Naresuan's action is just because he would make Burma a better Buddhist state.

Overall 'The Legend of King Naresuan 5' Scene 1 and Scene 2

In the first image we introduce a Burmese character. 'The Legend of King Naresuan 5' already asserted the ideology of Thai nationalism, which both compares the king to God, and communicates that religion, nation, and monarchy are inseparable from each other. In the first scenes of 'Makli,' the Burmese characters have yet to be exoticised. 'The Legend of King Naresuan 5' is a historical epic war film and is more obvious in exoticising of Burmese characters. According to Burgonye, this enables 'The Legend of King Naresuan 5' to rewrite the past using ideologies of the present time. In this manner, the film represents and orientalizes the Burmese—not from a place of historical fact, but from the ideology of the filmmakers (Burgonye, 2008). What is most interesting about 'the Legend of King Naresuan 5' is that the film heavily refers to myths surrounding Buddhism, and uses primordial elements, such as the Garuda, the Nāgas, and Vitarka mudra. These mythic elements are attached to Burmese characters to hint at the greater myth that there is a link between the monarchy and the gods. Similar to the first scene of 'Makli,' in 'The Legend of King Naresuan 5', Buddhism is emphasised, as Buddhist ideology offers justification for the monarchy to rule. Indeed, Jack Fong argues that the Thai monarchy uses primordial elements 'to sacralise the nation as rooted in a glorious past, as well as legitimise the king's place and continued relevance in Thai politics' (Fong, 2009: 675). Here, we now see the purpose of the Thai elite in using Smith's concept of primordial ethnicity. That is to create the sense that Thailand has been ruled by the monarchy since King Naresuan's time, and thereby, justify the present monarchy's power to govern.

'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok' (See Appendix 3)

'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok,' Image 1, Scene 1

Denotatively, we see a man, Kam, a male protagonist. Through use of the wide shot, on the top left of the image, we can see the bustling background of cars, motorbikes, busses, and sky trains. Kam looks rather uneasy with the bustling background of Bangkok. In the centre of the image, we can see a pointed-arched monument, with statues of soldiers on its frieze.

The background of the monument holds ideological connotation. The monument is called 'Anusawairee Thai' or Victory Monument. The monument was built to commemorate the heroic act of Thai soldiers who fought in the Franco-Thai war in 1941. According to Luang Wichit, General Pibunsongkarn's Minister of Propaganda, the monument was considered 'the fullest representation of Thai nationalism' (Young et al., 2007: 128). The Victory monument is intended to 'immediately impress foreigner guests of how prosperous our country (Thailand) is' (Chatri, 2004: 383). Its base features soldiers both from modern times and from pre-modern times, dating back to the Sukothai period (1238- 1438). This is to connote

the primordial theme of Thai nationalism—that Thailand is a great warrior nation dating back to its origin in the Sukothai period.

In this way, the Victory Monument connotes a strong nationalistic message that Thailand is a great nation that can fight against Western power, in this case, France. Along with the victory, the visibility of cars, buses, sky trains, and Baiyoke building connotes a similar message that Thailand is a modern country. Still, it is also important to note that the Victory Monument does not always convey a nationalistic message. As Young et al. argue, 'Victory Monument is now reinterpreted as and understood in completely different context…The Monument is now seen as traffic obstacles' (Young et al., 2007,: 128).

'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok,' Image 2, Scene 1

Denotatively, we see Kam, in a brown t-shirt, talking on a telephone as he rides the bus. The lighting is bright and, with the use of close-up shot, we can see Kam's uneasy facial expression. As with Makli, Kam's appearance is not distinctive from that of Thai people. Whereas in the second scene of 'Makli' the film exoticizes Makli by dressing her in a traditional skirt, here we see Kam wearing a brown t-shirt, connoting that Kam is an ordinary commoner.

'Myanmar In Love In Bangkok,' Image 3, Scene 1

Later in the film we are shown Ram, Kam's father, and the person on the other side of the telephone conversation. In the background, we can see an alley of a traditional fishing boat, called 'Ruen Phra Mon'. 'Ruen Phra Mon' is not a distinctively 'Burmese' fishing boat, as it is widely used in Thailand and Vietnam as well (Wyatt, 1984). However, the connotation is that, in the first image, Thailand is represented as a 'modern' nation with a skyline of tall buildings, and with bustling streets. Here, traditional elements like the 'Ruen Phra Mon' are once again attached to Burmese characters.

'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok,' Image 1, Scene 2

Denotatively, we could see that Kam is looking into something, as if he is yearning for someone. Kam is wearing a white t-shirt; white could connote purity and innocence. Compared to the first image we see of Kam, wherein he wears a confused expression, his facial expression is relatively calm in this image. The close-up shot emphasises Kam's emotional expression. In contrast to the fist image in the first scene where the image is captured using wide angle lens and the emphasis is more on the bustling surroundings, this image emphasises more on the character (Turner, 1988).

'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok,' Image 2, Scene 2

In this image, we see our female protagonist, Karn, sitting in her workplace, a tattoo shop. She sports bleached blonde hair, a t-shirt, jeans, and red converse shoes; her overall appearance connotes that Karn is a rebel. The t-shirt and jeans combination could be an intertext nod to James Dean and Marlon Brando, who are famous for their rebelliousness. Converse's advertisement itself states: 'shoes [are] boring, wear Converse.' Moreover, Thai women's hair is generally black; dying her hair blonde connotes that Karn is not like other Thai women. Like Kam, Karn does not look excited or happy. Perhaps, she is losing someone or something. The lighting overall is purple-red—a colour perhaps connoting passion and love. Through a medium-wide shot, we see that there is a window of the tattoo shop that separates Karn from the outside. This could connote that sense that Karn is an outsider to Thai society.

'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok,' Image 3, Scene 2

Continuing on from the first image, we now see that Kam is at sea on a boat. In contrast to land, which connotes a sense of stability, the sea could also connote a sense of instability and danger, as the sea itself is unpredictable. The connotation of the sea could also be linked to Kam's emotional state. In the first image, we see that, although Kam looks rather calm, he also looks deeply unhappy. In the second image, we see Karn looking outside the window, as if she yearns for someone. The juxtaposition of these images is to connote the impossibility of Kam and Karn's relationship. Kam is at the sea, ignorant as to what may happen, and, Karn is trapped in her tattoo shop. The completely different settings (the sea and the tattoo shop), perhaps also connote the impossibility of their relationship, as they are too different. Indeed, we can see Kam's hand holding a picture of Karn. This is to show that he still remembers and has feelings for Karn.

Moreover, in the first scene, we could see that Kam looks rather confused in the metropolitan setting of Bangkok. In this last image, we see him sitting on a boat, which acts as a reference to the third image from the first scene. There, we could see an alley of traditional fishing boats behind Kam's father. Putting Kam in a boat, is to connote that Kam does not belong in Bangkok. That is, in the very last image we see of Kam, we see that he is sent back to his roots—his father's fishing boat.

Overall 'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok' Scene 1 and Scene 2

Similar to Makli, Kam's appearance is no different from that of the Thai characters; he is not being exoticized. This is perhaps to suggest that the Thai and Burmese identities are encompassed—that Thai and Burmese identities are not so different from each other after all. Although 'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok' is not as obvious as 'The Legend of King Naresuan

5,' the dichotomy between Thai and Burmese selfhood is still reinforced. The Burmese are not represented as threats, yet this does not equate true equality (Novo, 2009). For example, the first scene of 'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok,' is to give us the sense that Kam cannot cope with the modern and bustling setting of Bangkok. In the end, we see that Kam is sent back from where he came, the 'Ruen Phra Mon.' Here, the Burmese character is once again being attached to a traditional element and is Orientalised in the process.

The narrative is part and parcel with the romantic genre itself, which works in the framework of the unequal dichotomy. In his study of romance as a genre, Northrop Frye asserts that romance narratives have a 'fixed familiarity', and in the narrative the hero is represented as a 'superior saviour' (Frye, 1982: 137). Likewise, in her study of interracial romance in cinema, Joanna Lo argues that the interracial relationships in romantic film are always based on Edward Said's Orientalism (Lo, 2005). In such films, interracial relationships between a male Westerner and the female native reinforce the portrayal of the East as an 'aberrant, inferior place, and as something to be feared and controlled' (Lo, 2005: 14). Here, we found Kam being Orientalised accordingly, reinforcing the position of Karn as a superior saviour. Thus, the myth of Thai superiority is still connoted.

CONCLUSION

By using semiotics to interpret samples, I discovered that Thai cinema still 'others'—and reproduces myths about—the Burmese people in various ways. Seemingly, 'Myanmar In Love In Bangkok,' and 'Makli' embrace the grammar of encompassment, suggesting that Thai and Burmese people are alike. However, both films still express a paternalistic sense toward the Burmese character. That is, the Burmese are represented in a less threatening manner, but as still being inferior to Thais. When Kam first arrived in Bangkok, he bore an expression of astonishment, denoting that he, a Burmese immigrant, could not cope with the modern city of Bangkok. Likewise, although Makli is not negatively represented in the first scene, she is dead in the second scene. While theorists such as Wood argue that horror films represent our universal fear(s), Wee suggests that horror could be seen as an expression of national instability as well (Wee, 2014). The Burmese maid Makli transgresses the imagined national boundaries of Thailand. Indeed, we could see that two of the three films ended with the death of their respective Burmese characters, or, in the case of 'Myanmar in Love in Bangkok'y the separation of Burmese and Thai characters. This is perhaps to suggest the impossibility of Thai and Burmese coexistence.

Of the three films, 'the Legend of King Naresuan 5' is perhaps the most blatant in its attempt to 'other' Burmese characters; for instance, the armour of Minyekyawswa, which is the best evidence to illustrate that Thai filmmakers use their own 'vision' to create Burmese characters. In line with its genre as a historical epic war film, primordial elements and myth are used to create a link between the past and present monarchy. These elements are employed to help secure the hegemonic power of the royal family. Ideologies of Buddhism are used to justify the legitimacy of the king's past and present right to govern. These films elucidated the role of national film as dominant fiction that works to maintain the status quo of the elite through the maintenance of ideologies. 'The Legend of King Naresuan 5' is perhaps the best evidence that Thai cinema negatively represents the Burmese, rewrites the past according to the present-day ideologies, and uses the idea of the evil 'other' to bolster Thai nationalism.

Thai scholars see the Thai-Burmese relationship in a positive light, since both nations are now part of ASEAN, a transnational body that works toward shared future goals, suggesting that the myth of the evil Burmese will disappear, and that both countries will soon become one community. From this research, I find alternative—if not contradictory—findings about Burmese myth in contemporary cinema. That is, while two out of the three films are less overt in 'othering' the Burmese, they all still connote that the Burmese identity is inferior to the Thai identity. This is perhaps to connote that, in the end of the Thai monarchy, Thai nationalism itself is weakened and thus the role of 'other' remains important. This research only touches the surface of our understanding of Thai nationalism in and of itself, as well as the representation of the Burmese as 'other'. I hope that this research will lead the way to studying Thai nationalism and Burma in a more critical way. What kinds of myths are used to fabricate this imagined community? Who is being othered, and, most importantly, who benefits from nationalist ideologies? These questions still remain unanswered in the world of academia, and I hope to change that.

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APPENDIX 1

Makli. (2011). Sophon Sakdaphisit, dir., GMM Grammy International, Bangkok, [DVD].

Synopsis: Makli, a Burmese maid, is murdered. Later, her ghost haunt entire village called 'Ladda Land.'

FILM STILLS – SCENE 1 (12:05-13:20):

Image 1

Image 2

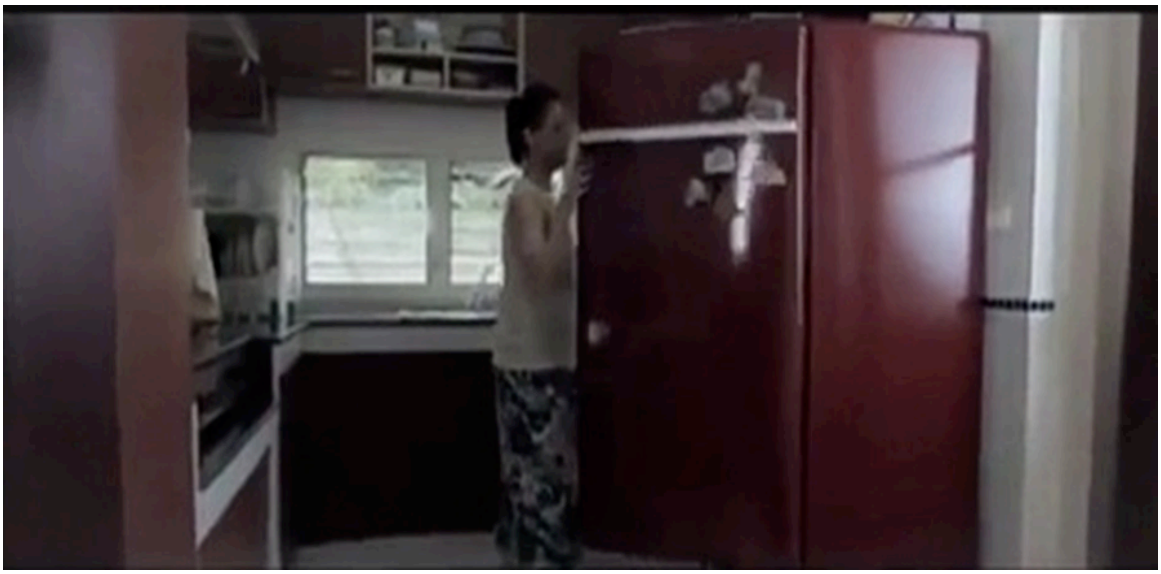

Image3

FILM STILLS – SCENE 2 (1:35:05-1:36:39):

Image1

Image 2

Image 3

APPENDIX 2

The Legend of King Naresuan [Victory]. (2014) Chatreechalerm Yukol, dir., Sahamongkhol Films, Bangkok, [DVD].

Synopsis: Part of 'The Legend of King Naresuan' series, this film retell the epic Thai-Burmese battle of 'Nong Sarai' in 1563, where King Naresuan conquers over Burmese army.

FILM STILLS – SCENE 1 (3:22-4:02):

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

FILM STILLS – SCENE 2 (1:48:11-1:50:08):

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

APPENDIX 3

Myanmar In Love In Bangkok. (2014). Nidchaya Boonsiripat, dir., Tannud Film, Bangkok, [DVD].

Synopsis: A star-crossed love story of Kam, a Burmese immigrants, and Karn, a Thai tattoo artist.

FILM STILLS – SCENE 1 (4:39-5:58):

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

FILM STILLS – SCENE 2 (1:45:01-1:47:15):

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

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