

## Cinema and Thai Politics: 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976



*The Terrorists*

### Causes and Consequences: Documenting 6<sup>th</sup> October

The massacre of students at Thammasat University on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 came almost exactly three years after the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 killings, when students had protested against the military dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn. Forty-six people died at Thammasat, and their corpses were desecrated by a baying mob. The incident began with a small group of students campaigning against Thanom's return from exile. On 25<sup>th</sup> September 1976, the police hanged two of the anti-Thanom activists,<sup>1</sup> and on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1976 a group of Thammasat students performed a reenactment of the hanging.

The right-wing newspaper *Dao Siam* reported this performance on its front page on 6<sup>th</sup> October, with a photograph of one of the students posing as a hanging victim.<sup>2</sup> The image had been retouched, accentuating the man's resemblance to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn (now King Rama X), and a banner headline accused the students of hanging the Prince in effigy.<sup>3</sup> The result was a devastating example of the power of propaganda, with the

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<sup>1</sup> (Choomporn Thummai and Vichai Kasripongsa)

<sup>2</sup> (The student was Apinan Buahapakdee.)

<sup>3</sup> The publication of the *Dao Siam* [ดาวสยาม] photograph was highly inflammatory, as David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavinija wrote (1981, p. 274): "Faculty members later were divided as to whether or not the image had been deliberately contrived, but the effect was the same regardless of the motive—popular outrage." The newspaper's front page was reproduced in พลิกแผ่นดิน: นประวัติศาสตร์เมืองไทย 24 มิย 2475 ถึง 14 ตค 2516 (Prachuap Amphasawet, 2000), p. 548, though the photograph was blacked out. The photograph was removed from an exhibition at Thammasat University in 1996, on the day before the show was due to open; a question mark was hung in its place. For more analysis of the photograph's impact, see ประวัติศาสตร์ที่เพิ่งสร้าง (Somsak Jeamteerasakul, 2001), pp. 149-154.

incendiary front-page condemnation of the students precipitating the massacre at Thammasat.

The military's legal impunity and political influence make it a largely untouchable subject for filmmakers, and coded, metaphorical references are therefore employed. Anocha Suwichakornpong's *Mundane History*<sup>4</sup> (2009) and Prabda Yoon's *Someone from Nowhere*<sup>5</sup> (2017), for example, both use domestic settings as metaphors for the tensions between the military and society. Reliance on metaphor has its drawbacks, however: if the allusion is too direct, a work may be censored, though if the message is too subtle, the intended meaning may not be understood by the audience.<sup>6</sup>

The short film *Friendship Ended with Mudasir Now Salman Is My Best Friend*<sup>7</sup> (2018) acknowledges this dilemma, challenging the audience to decode its rapid-fire montage of allusions. The film makes indirect reference to the 6<sup>th</sup> October massacre using animated clips, with the *Powerpuff Girls* cartoon characters replaced by pictures of Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit, the Red Bull logo, and the Scout emblem. These refer respectively to Nawaphon, the Red Gaur, and the Village Scouts, the three paramilitary groups that joined the police and army in storming Thammasat University.<sup>8</sup> As a cryptic clue to its

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<sup>4</sup> [เจ้านกกระจอก]

<sup>5</sup> [มา ณ ที่นี้]

<sup>6</sup> Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn (2010) wrote: "if the films are too opaque then the communicative power of cinema has not been utilized. The hidden idea, then, is impotent." Thanavi Chotpradit made a similar observation in relation to political art: "The authorities won't get it. However, this is a limitation in itself. If nobody understands your work, then what's the point?" (Ariane Kupferman-Sutthavong, 2018; *Life*, p. 1).

<sup>7</sup> *Friendship Ended with Mudasir Now Salman Is My Best Friend* [มิตรภาพสิ้นสุดกับ Mudasir ตอนนี้ Salman คือเพื่อนที่ดีที่สุดของฉัน], directed by Tewprai Bualoi, was shown on an iPhone at the *Internet Universality Beyond Words* exhibition at the Thailand Creative and Design Center in Bangkok, from 28<sup>th</sup> September to 14<sup>th</sup> October 2018. It includes extracts from Charnvit Kasetsiri's documentary *14 ตุลาคม* (1993) and the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon *Jerry's Cousin* (1951). Thành Huy's *Vietnam War in a Nutshell* (2018) also reappropriates animated clips for political satire, including the same *Tom and Jerry* extract (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNcUnQIAF1E>).

<sup>8</sup> The massacre has also inspired numerous works of visual art. Sudarat Musikawong (2010, p. 22) calls art about 6<sup>th</sup> October "trauma art" and Phatarawadee Phataranawik (2016, p. 12B) examines art that "attempts to address the terrible truth" about the attack. Chochechai Takpoe painted a student's head riddled with bullet holes ['ก่อน-หลัง ตุลาคม 2519'] (1976); reproduced in Sudarat Musikawong (2010), p. 31. In Pratuang Emjaroen's painting 'Sacrifice (Fasting Buddha)' ['บำเพ็ญทุกรกิริยา'] (1976), the Buddha has a black hole in his shoulder, representing a bullet wound; reproduced in *Pratuang Emjaroen: Traces and Trails* [ประเทือง เอมเจริญ "ร้อยรั้วสรรพสิทธิ์" ตำนานชีวิตและสังคม] (2015), pp. 142-143. Pratuang's 'Seine Stone' [sic.] ['ก้อนหิน เสนีย์'] (1976) includes a portrait of Seni Pramoj, who was Prime Minister at the time of the massacre; *ibid.*, p. 148. Piles of skulls in Pratuang's 'National Fanatic' ['บ้ารักชาติ'] (1976) and 'Red Morning Glory and a Rotten Rifle' ['ผักมั่งแดง ปืนเนา'] (1976) also refer to the massacre. The former, reproduced in *Spirit of Art: A Retrospective 1963-2005* [จิตวิญญาณศิลปะ คัดสรรผลงานจิตรกรรมระหว่างปี พ.ศ. 2506-2548] (Pratuang Emjaroen, 2005; p. 47), includes a caption condemning the event: "Thais will perish if people kill each other" (Pandit Chanrochanakit, 2015; p. 123). The latter, reproduced in Apinan Poshyananda (1992, plate 51), features a similar caption: "When people take up arms to slaughter one another / The nation is left with devastation and chaos" (*ibid.*, p. 167). Apinan (*ibid.*, pp. 171-172) describes another painting inspired by the massacre: "Santiphab Nakhao's *6 October* (1979) is a powerful image of a fat man sitting in an armchair atop a heap of lifeless bodies." In Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Horror in Pink* [ปีศาจสีชมพู] (2001), an incongruous pink man is inserted into news photographs of the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976, and 'Black May' 1992 massacres; reproduced in *Phenomena and Prophecies* [ทำและทาย] (2011, pp. 60-67). Similarly, for his *Selfie Series* [เซลฟี่ ซีรี่ส์] (2016), Chumpol Kamwanna recreated 6<sup>th</sup> October photographs, depicting himself taking selfies in each painting; reproduced in Phatarawadee Phataranawik (2016, p. 12B). An exhibition of art influenced by 6<sup>th</sup> October, *Flashback '76: History and Memory of October 6 Massacre* [อดีตหลอน: ประวัติศาสตร์และความทรงจำ 6 ตุลา 19] (2008) included Vasan Sithiket's video 'Delete Our History, Now!' ['อำนาจ/การลบทิ้ง'] (2008), in which he digitally erased photographs of the massacre, as they are erased from national historiography (exhibition catalogue, pp. 10-11); and Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Died on 6th October 1976* [ตาย 6 ตุลา 19] (2008), autopsy photographs of massacre victims soaked in blood (exhibition catalogue, pp. 13, 15-16). Reproduced in Iola Lenzi (2009) 'History and Memory in Thai Contemporary Art', *C-Arts*, vol. 11 (November-December). Vasan's exhibition *Blue October* [ตุลาลึกลับ] (1996) featured a series of paintings of the massacre, based on news photographs, with gold leaf applied onto each of the victims as a mark of respect.

political subtext, the film also includes a split-second image of the nondescript gate from which the two anti-Thanom activists were hanged.

Pen-ek Ratanaruang's documentary *Paradoxocracy*<sup>9</sup> (2013) explains the media's role in misrepresenting the mock hanging of 4<sup>th</sup> October 1976, though only in general terms, without specific reference to the Crown Prince, indicating the episode's continued sensitivity. Even Thunskas Pansittivorakul's otherwise uncompromising *The Terrorists*<sup>10</sup> (2011) refers only euphemistically to "the hanging of an important person in effigy." *Different Views, Death Sentence*<sup>11</sup> (2011), a documentary commemorating the massacre, claims euphemistically that *Dao Siam* accused the students of expressing "severe ill-will to the Crown Prince."

Thunskas analysed the massacre and its causes in *The Terrorists* and *Homogeneous, Empty Time*<sup>12</sup> (2017). *The Terrorists* examines the demonisation of protesters in 1976 and 2010, when the government used scaremongering rhetoric as a pretext for military crackdowns. In both cases, the state defended the massacres as preemptive measures against supposed violent insurgencies. In 1976, an influential monk encouraged attacks on the students, whom he unashamedly dehumanised. *The Terrorists* quotes him justifying the killing of Communists: "It's the same as killing a fish to cook and offer it to the monks."<sup>13</sup> Thunskas's film develops this extraordinary pronouncement into an extended visual metaphor, with sequences filmed on a fishing trawler and at an aquarium. The short film *Don't Forget Me*<sup>14</sup> (2003) also quotes the monk's "terrible words" and the drama *Time in a Bottle* (1991) portrays the resulting social vilification of the students: a doctor refuses to treat a massacre victim, leaving her to bleed to death.<sup>15</sup>

Thunskas made *The Terrorists* in the aftermath of the 2010 military crackdown, and the documentary is a passionate response to the cycle of recurring state oppression. Each of Thunskas's films is sexually and politically challenging, though *The Terrorists* features his most provocative sequence: a naked man is shown masturbating, while captions describe the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 massacre. The film then cuts directly from the masturbation to archive footage of the Thammasat victims' desecrated corpses, accompanied by a romantic song.<sup>16</sup> Outwardly, the man's orgasm and the military massacre have nothing in common, except

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<sup>9</sup> [ประชาธิปไตย]

<sup>10</sup> [ผู้ก่อการร้าย]

<sup>11</sup> *Different Views, Death Sentence* [sic.] [ต่างความคิด นิดถึงตาย ๖ ตุลาคม ๒๕๑๙], produced by Suthachai Yimprasert, was released on DVD. An earlier commemorative documentary [ชำระประวัติศาสตร์ ๖ ตุลาคม ๒๕๑๙] (1996), released on VHS, concludes with a caption calling for an end to state violence against civilians.

<sup>12</sup> *Homogeneous, Empty Time* [สูญกาล] was directed by Thunskas Pansittivorakul and Harit Srikhao.

<sup>13</sup> The monk (Kittivuddho Bhikku) made the comments in an interview with the magazine *จัดรัส* ('สัมภาษณ์กับพระกิตติวุฑฒโฒ', 29<sup>th</sup> June 1976). Artist Sutee Kunavichayanont carved the quote onto a school desk for his 'History Class' ['ห้องเรียนประวัติศาสตร์'] installation (2000), inviting viewers to make tracings of this and other carved texts and drawings, all of which represented historic events excluded from the national curriculum (including the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 and 'Black May' 1992 massacres); see also *Concept Context Contestation* [มนทัศน์ บริบท และการต่อต้าน ศิลปะและส่วนรวมในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้] (ed. Iola Lenzi, 2014), p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> *Don't Forget Me* [อย่าลืมฉัน] was directed by Manussak Dokmai.

<sup>15</sup> *Time in a Bottle* [เวลาในขวดแก้ว] was directed by Prayoon Wongcheun.

<sup>16</sup> (Linda Napapan's single, คนร่อยเล่ห์)

for their shock value. However, for Thunskaa, one is a metaphor for the other: “that massacre is like masturbation. Some people did it to make it better. They need to feel good and happy, but it’s really cruel.”<sup>17</sup> Thunskaa’s intention is not to exploit or eroticise violence, but to condemn what he views as the military government’s quasi-sexual impulse to massacre its opponents. The film also drew the attention of government monitors with a provocative caption asking the rhetorical question, “who do you think has the power to order the soldiers to shoot?”

In *Homogeneous, Empty Time*, Thunskaa explores the construction of Thailand’s national identity, and the nationalist fervour stoked by state propaganda venerating the three pillars (nation, religion, and monarchy).<sup>18</sup> He shows how such values are absorbed and passed from generation to generation, a result of media announcements that, according to Ing Kanjanavanit, “sicken the airwaves with constant saccharine exhortations to the people to love Nation, Religion, King.”<sup>19</sup> The film shows how military propaganda, disseminated via radio, television, and billboards, inculcates an irrational fear of any notional threat to the three pillars.

‘Protecting’ these pillars has been cited as justification for the demonisation of political opponents, from the unfounded *lèse-majesté* accusations used as a pretext for the 6<sup>th</sup> October massacre, to the anti-government campaigners who claimed in 2008 that, without their illegal protests, “the monarchy might collapse.”<sup>20</sup> *Homogeneous, Empty Time*’s interviewees, some with tears in their eyes, vow to protect the three pillars with their lives. Army cadets, for example, pledge their commitment to defend Thailand against its enemies, though they are unable to specify who those enemies might be. A Village Scout leader, wearing a bright yellow shirt, boasts of his brief encounter with King Rama IX: “I peeled a coconut for the King... And the King ate my coconut! A round of applause for me, please!” The assembled Village Scouts all pledge to defend the monarchy. Cut to: footage of Village Scouts and other ultra-nationalists attacking the students on 6<sup>th</sup> October. Thunskaa thus reveals the ultimate consequences of state-sanctioned nationalist rhetoric.<sup>21</sup>

Other documentaries focus on the human tragedy of the 6<sup>th</sup> October massacre. For her films *Silenced Memories*<sup>22</sup> (2014) and *Respectfully Yours*<sup>23</sup> (2016), Patporn Phoonthong

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Thunskaa Pansittivorakul in Bangkok (1<sup>st</sup> May 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Similarly, artist Prawat Laucharoen’s installation ‘The Four Elements’ (1993), a critique of the three pillars and the constitution, has not been exhibited in Thailand. An installation view is reproduced in *The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art: Installations and Performances* (ed. Kirsty Grant, 1993; unpaginated).

<sup>19</sup> Ing Kanjanavanit (2011), p. 19; Ing’s essay ‘Poses from Dreamland’ [‘ท่าโพส จากแดน ช่างฝัน’] is included in *Phenomena and Prophecies [ฟ้าและทนาย]* (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Sondhi Limthongkul, quoted by Nattaya Chetchotiros (2008), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Homogeneous, Empty Time* also serves as a counterpoint to movies such as Sombat Methanee’s *หนักแผ่นดิน* (1977). As Rachel V. Harrison (2010, p. 206) explains, Sombat’s “overtly didactic” propaganda film celebrates the Village Scouts as national heroes.

<sup>22</sup> [ความทรงจำไร้เสียง]

<sup>23</sup> *Respectfully Yours* [ด้วยความนับถือ] ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig2DCytG8\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig2DCytG8_Y)) was first shown, in a shorter version, in 2016. It was also shown at a discussion about cultural representation of the massacre, ‘The Forgotten’, which took place as part of ‘The Strange Facts of an Estranged Land’ event at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies, on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2017. *Respectfully Yours* and Patporn’s subsequent film *The Two Brothers* [สองพี่น้อง] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbQ9817ZZII>) are part of Documentation of Oct 6 [บันทึก 6 ตุลาคม], an online archive of materials relating to the 6<sup>th</sup> October massacre (<https://doct6.com/>).

interviewed elderly relatives of the students who were killed, presenting the victims for the first time as individuals rather than the battered corpses visible in news coverage of the massacre. In the intervening four decades since 6<sup>th</sup> October, the victims' families had never spoken publicly about the massacre, though the director encouraged them to "break through the silence after all these years."<sup>24</sup> For her subsequent documentary, *The Two Brothers* (2017), she interviewed relatives of the two men hanged for protesting against the return of Thanom Kittikachorn. Again, their case had been forgotten for forty years, as Patporn's codirector explained: "The truth of Oct 6 is still stuck in a different world."<sup>25</sup> Uniquely, *The Two Brothers* shows the *Dao Siam* front page that sparked the massacre.

The short documentary "*Red*" at Last<sup>26</sup> (2006) is told from the first-person perspective of one 6<sup>th</sup> October victim. The film begins and ends with a fictitious voiceover from the dead man, and a survivor of the attack narrates flickering archive footage of the incident.<sup>27</sup> The short film *Don't Forget Me* is a multilayered documentary featuring archive footage of 6<sup>th</sup> October and scathing political captions, accompanied by the plaintive title song<sup>28</sup> and a narration appropriated from an ethnographic documentary on the nomadic Mlabri tribe. The voiceover describes the tribe's ceremonies and rituals, its tone and content providing an intentionally ironic counterpoint to the massacre footage.

### Revealing and Concealing: Narratives of 6<sup>th</sup> October

The events of 6<sup>th</sup> October have also been represented in narrative films,<sup>29</sup> most prominently *By the Time It Gets Dark*<sup>30</sup> (2016). In Anocha Suwichakornpong's film, a young director (Ann, a surrogate for Anocha herself) is making a biopic about a former student, who describes the 6<sup>th</sup> October attackers "dragging the dead bodies out to burn them."<sup>31</sup> (Although the film was not censored on its original release, a screening to commemorate the massacre was blocked by the military government in 2017.)<sup>32</sup>

As in *Mundane History*, *Someone from Nowhere*, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Syndromes and a Century*<sup>33</sup> (2006), scenes in *By the Time It Gets Dark* are replayed to suggest

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<sup>24</sup> Patporn Phoothong, quoted by Kong Rithdee (2017a), *Life*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Teerawat Rujenatham, quoted by Kong Rithdee (2017b), *Life*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> "*Red*" at Last [มนัส เตียรสังห์] was directed by Suchart Sawasdsri.

<sup>27</sup> The eponymous victim is Manus Siansing, whose nickname was Daeng (meaning 'red').

<sup>28</sup> The song is by Chatree, from their album *ชะตารัก* (1981).

<sup>29</sup> For an alternative analysis of the massacre's depiction in Thai cinema, see '6 ตุลาคม ผ่านสายต่านักทำหนังไทย' (6<sup>th</sup> October 2017), on the Voice TV website (<https://www.voicetv.co.th/read/529825>). For further discussion of politics and cinema, see Sirichai Leelertyuth (28<sup>th</sup> June 2012), 'ภาพยนตร์สนทนา ข้อสังเกตว่าด้วย "การเมือง" ในหนังไทย', on the Prachatai website (<https://prachatai.com/journal/2012/06/41309>).

<sup>30</sup> [ดาวคะนอง]

<sup>31</sup> Anocha Suwichakornpong (2016)

<sup>32</sup> The planned screening on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017 at Warehouse 30 in Bangkok was blocked, though screenings on the same day as part of 6<sup>th</sup> October commemorative events at the National Film Archive ['ลิ้มเสียดิถอยความคิดถึง'] and Thammasat University ['41 ปี 6 ตุลาคม ปกป้องประชาธิปไตยประชาชน'] were permitted. Also, the film was released on DVD in Thailand on the same day, without incident.

<sup>33</sup> [แสงศตวรรษ]

history repeating: Ann's first session with the massacre survivor is later restaged, with the two women played by different actresses. Anocha self-reflexively questions the motivations of a director in tackling such a politically loaded event, as Ann confesses to her interviewee: "Your life is meaningful. A life worth living. Whereas me, I appropriate someone's life and turn it into a film."<sup>34</sup> She also challenges the ethics of such appropriation, as another character advises Ann to let the film's subject write the script herself: "You should give it to her. She's a writer. And it's about her life, so it's her story."<sup>35</sup> The film therefore acknowledges the inherent limitations involved in representing historical events in works of fiction.

*By the Time It Gets Dark* recreates a familiar photograph from 6<sup>th</sup> October, of a police officer<sup>36</sup> aiming his gun while smoking a cigarette, though it begins by subverting the audience's expectations. Students are shown lying on the ground, watched over by armed soldiers, though what initially appears to be a flashback to 6<sup>th</sup> October is, in fact, taking place on a movie soundstage. The sense of verisimilitude is further confounded when an offscreen voice (Ann, the director) instructs the soldiers to kick the students and point guns at them.

Other films that touch on politically sensitive events also use similar distancing devices. The short film *Re-presentation*<sup>37</sup> (2007) shows the junta announcing the 2006 coup on television, radio, and via a *Bangkok Post* banner headline. A short film by Manussak Dokmai (2010) includes photographs of the 6<sup>th</sup> October massacre shown on a digital camera's LCD screen.<sup>38</sup> In *Time in a Bottle*, the massacre is announced via a radio broadcast. *Young Bao*<sup>39</sup> (2013) and *Colic*<sup>40</sup> (2006) both include headlines about 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976. *Colic* is one of the more unusual interpretations of the massacre: in this horror film, a general from 1976<sup>41</sup> is reincarnated as a newborn baby, and the restless spirits of his victims torment the infant and his parents. The film suggests that, in the absence of legal accountability, karma is unavoidable. These representations of historical events, filtered through the news media, reflect how most Thais experienced the events themselves: as passive media consumers rather than participants or eyewitnesses.

On the other hand, directors who depict 6<sup>th</sup> October without such distancing techniques run the risk of censorship. Films that capture the full horror of the massacre, either

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<sup>34</sup> Anocha Suwichakornpong (2016)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> The photograph, depicting Lt Col. Salang Bunnag, is reproduced in *Chronicle of Thailand: Headline News since 1946* (ed. Nicholas Grossman, 2009), p. 212.

<sup>37</sup> *Re-presentation* [ผีมะขาม ไฟฟ้า ประชาธิปไตย ในคืนที่ลมพัดหวน] was directed by Chai Chaiyachit and Chisanucha Kongwailap. It also features archive footage of 6<sup>th</sup> October.

<sup>38</sup> (titled นครพนมมือบ้าง นครไม่พนมมือบ้าง)

<sup>39</sup> *Young Bao* [ยัง'ขาว คาราบาว เตอะมูฟวี่] was directed by Yuthakorn Sukmuktapha (credited as 'R-Jo'). The film features a mockup of a newspaper headline: "Almost 100 people have been effected from 6<sup>th</sup> Oct In Thailand" [sic]. 'Almost 100' is arguably an exaggeration, as the official death toll was forty-six, though it is consistent with unofficial estimates.

<sup>40</sup> *Colic* [เด็กเห็นผี] was directed by Patchanon Thammajira.

<sup>41</sup> The General is Arun Dvadasin, who was killed during an attempted coup by the 'Young Turks' against Thanin Kraivichien on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1977.

through realistic reconstruction or archive footage, have been cut or banned. When Ing Kanjanavanit appealed against the banning of *Shakespeare Must Die*<sup>42</sup> (2012), a court upheld the decision on the grounds that her recreation of 6<sup>th</sup> October could cause division in society.<sup>43</sup> The film includes a reenactment of a notorious incident in which a man hits a hanging corpse with a chair, as depicted in a news photograph that symbolises the extreme violence and prejudice of the event.<sup>44</sup> As Ing explained: “I want people to remember: this happened before. Do we really want this to happen again?”<sup>45</sup> *Friendship Ended with Mudasir Now Salman Is My Best Friend* references this photograph with an animated clip from *The Simpsons* in which Bart hits Homer with a chair.<sup>46</sup>

The horror film *Haunted Universities*<sup>47</sup> (2009) also recreates the violence of the massacre, and was censored as a result: ghosts of 6<sup>th</sup> October students are gunned down by soldiers, one shot in the chest as he prepares to defend himself, and a second shot in the back as he tries to escape. Another horror movie, *Meat Grinder*<sup>48</sup> (2009), includes archive footage of bodies being burned on 6<sup>th</sup> October, though this was deleted in its entirety for the film’s domestic release. (*Meat Grinder*’s title was also changed, among numerous other revisions to the film.)<sup>49</sup>

*Blue Sky of Love*<sup>50</sup> (2009), *Young Bao*, and Chatrichalerm Yukol’s *Somsri*<sup>51</sup> (1985) also evoke 6<sup>th</sup> October, though they avoided censorship by toning down the horror of the event. *Blue Sky of Love*, a comedy, begins with a police officer’s flashback to 6<sup>th</sup> October, showing the student protests though not the violent retribution. *Young Bao* shows students lying on the ground, with soldiers watching over them (a scene also recreated at the start

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<sup>42</sup> [เชคสเปียร์ต้องตาย]

<sup>43</sup> The Appeals Court’s verdict was announced on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Neal Ulevich’s photograph of the man preparing to hit the hanging corpse has lost none of its potency, as Kong Rithdee has written (2016; *Life*, p. 1): “The importance of Ulevich’s picture as a historical record is immense, becoming even more so over the decades as society has gone through other clashes of ideologies, leaving more dead bodies on the street.” The image is reprinted in *Moments: The Pulitzer Prize-Winning Photographs* (Hal Buell, 2015), p. 113. It was also used as the cover photograph for the Dead Kennedys’ single ‘Holiday in Cambodia’ (1980). The CD and cassette editions of *Gigantrix Extinction* (2012), an album by Killing Fields, feature drawings by Dissolute inspired by Ulevich’s photograph. (The album includes ‘6<sup>th</sup> October’, a song inspired by the massacre.) Rap Against Dictatorship’s online music video for their song ‘Which Is My Country’ [‘ประเทศกูมี’] (2018) recreates the photograph, with the hanging corpse represented by a battered mannequin. The music video was remade in an animated emoji version for the Media Arts and Design Festival 2018 at Chiang Mai University Arts Center. For her *Where Are They Now?* [ไทยมุ่ง] series (2008), Ing Kanjanavanit painted portraits of onlookers in the background of Ulevich’s photograph (reproduced in *Flashback ’76*, pp. 1-3, 6). Kosit Juntaratip recreated the photograph using his own blood (‘Thammasat Hanging’), for his *Allergic Realities* exhibition (2016). Vasan Sitthiket’s *Blue October* exhibition included the painting ‘This Is the Buddhism Country’ [sic.] [‘นี่แหละหนอเมืองพระพุทธศาสนา’] (1996) (exhibition catalogue, p. 26), a recreation of Ulevich’s photograph.

<sup>45</sup> Ing Kanjanavanit (2014)

<sup>46</sup> The clip is from an episode titled *A Milhouse Divided*, broadcast on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1996.

<sup>47</sup> *Haunted Universities* [มหาลัยสยองขวัญ] (2009) was directed by Bunjong Sinthanamongkolkul and Sutthiporn Tubtim.

<sup>48</sup> *Meat Grinder* was directed by Tiwa Moeithaisong; its original title [ก๋วยเตี๋ยว เนื้อ คน] (‘beef noodles’) was changed to เชือด ก่อน ชิม (‘slice before eating’).

<sup>49</sup> The film’s Thai and international versions are compared on the Movie Censorship website (<https://www.movie-censorship.com/report.php?ID=451668>).

<sup>50</sup> *Blue Sky of Love* [ฟ้าใส ใจชื่นบาน] was directed by Krekchai Jaiman and Napaporn Poonjaruen.

<sup>51</sup> [ครูสมศรี]

of *By the Time It Gets Dark*). *Somsri* includes a contemporary sequence in which riot police beat protesters, followed by a match cut to a 6<sup>th</sup> October flashback of a woman being beaten, though this is seen in black-and-white and lasts only a few seconds. A film by Pundhevanop Dhewakul<sup>52</sup> (1986) also includes a black-and-white flashback: although non-diegetic gunshots are heard repeatedly on the soundtrack, the violence depicted is limited to hand-to-hand combat. Thus, sanitised representations of the massacre—devoid of blood or death—are deemed acceptable, whereas real or realistic imagery is censored.

### Hallowed Grounds: The Legacy of 6<sup>th</sup> October

Thanin Kraivichien, who was appointed Prime Minister after the 6<sup>th</sup> October massacre, overturned the liberal reforms of the previous regime. His intensified political censorship included literal book-burnings, which are dramatised in *October Sonata*.<sup>53</sup> He also revived an anti-Communist purge that had begun earlier in the decade. The 6<sup>th</sup> October survivor in *By the Time It Gets Dark* describes “the methods with which the government clamped down on what they called “the terrorists”. They’d be thrown out of helicopters or set on fire in oil barrels.”<sup>54</sup> (The title of Thunskas Pansittivorakul’s *The Terrorists* refers to the use of this term in demonising not only Communists but also ‘redshirt’ protesters.) Suspected Communists were indeed burned alive in red oil barrels, and Thunskas alludes to this in *Santikhiri Sonata*<sup>55</sup> (2019) with a caption describing the killing of subversives by “pushing them into a ‘CXII Red Suitcase’”.

*Santikhiri Sonata* was filmed in the villages of Mae Salong and Hin Taek, whose names were changed to draw a line under their sinister legacies. Mae Salong was renamed Santikhiri (‘hill of peace’), and Hin Taek became Thoet Thai (‘honour Thailand’), though they were previously sites of anti-Communist violence. The film highlights this violent heritage—“A lot of people were killed, including villagers”—and includes graphic photographs of victims caught in the crossfire of a 1982 military raid on Thoet Thai.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul made several films in and around the village of Nabua, a location with an equally loaded history to that of Santikhiri, as its inhabitants were victims of the anti-Communist purge. In his short film *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee*<sup>56</sup> (2009), a narrator recalls the area’s past: “Soldiers once occupied this place. They killed and tortured the villagers and forced them to flee to the jungle.” Apichatpong’s *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*<sup>57</sup> (2010) was also filmed in the vicinity, and that film’s most iconic image—a man-ape with glowing red eyes—also has a political subtext: the creature is Boonmee’s son, who became an outcast in the jungle, as did many Communists from

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<sup>52</sup> [ช่างมันฉันไม่แคร์]

<sup>53</sup> Elliott Kulick and Dick Wilson (1996, p. 27) discuss Thanin’s censorship: “His repressiveness ran to sending Special Branch policemen to the liberal bookshop to take away 45,000 books to be burnt.”

<sup>54</sup> Anocha Suwichakornpong (2016)

<sup>55</sup> [สันติคีรี โชนาดา]

<sup>56</sup> *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* [จดหมายถึงลุงบุญมี] was part of the *Primitive* series, which also included the captivating short film *Phantoms of Nabua* [ชื่อว่า ผีนาบัว] (2009).

<sup>57</sup> [ลุงบุญมีระลึกชาติ]



Nabua and elsewhere. When the eponymous Boonmee confesses that he “killed too many” Communists, his sister reassures him that he did so “for the nation,” a justification given by many who unquestioningly support the military regime, whether through apathy or deference. In fact, Apichatpong says that even his own family members are “totally submissive, no questions asked: disruption of the flow and unity is really a big deal.”<sup>58</sup>

On the surface, Chulayarnnon Siriphol’s short, silent film *Planking* (2012) is merely a series of comic tableaux, in which a prankster lies incongruously on the ground. The film has further layers of meaning, however, relating not only to 6<sup>th</sup> October but also to Thai national identity itself. Each scene takes place at 8am or 6pm, when it is customary to stand while the national anthem is played; planking rather than standing is therefore an irreverent example of the “disruption of the flow and unity” that Apichatpong described.

Like *Santikhiri Sonata* and *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee*, *Planking* also evokes specific episodes from Thai history by appropriating politically charged locations.<sup>59</sup> For example, one sequence was filmed at the Thammasat University football pitch, where hundreds of students were forced by the military to lie during the 6<sup>th</sup> October massacre (as restaged in *By the Time It Gets Dark* and *Young Bao*). The planking man in Chulayarnnon’s film, adopting an identical pose on the same ground, provides a jarring reminder of the area’s violent past. Similarly, *Homogeneous, Empty Time* and Taiki Sakpisit’s *A Ripe Volcano*<sup>60</sup> (2011) both include sequences filmed at Bangkok’s Royal Hotel, which is associated with both 6<sup>th</sup> October and the subsequent ‘Black May’ massacre of 1992. *Homogeneous, Empty Time* reveals the building’s grim function in relation to 6<sup>th</sup> October: “They hid the bodies of dead students in this hotel.” Although the legacy of 6<sup>th</sup> October has been whitewashed by successive military governments, it continues to be memorialised by cinema.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul in Chiang Mai (27<sup>th</sup> June 2016).

<sup>59</sup> The seemingly tranquil landscapes in Pachara Piyasongsoot’s exhibition *Anatomy of Silence* [กายวิภาคของความเงิบ] (2018) also represent politically charged locations. His *Nabua* [นบบัว] series includes ‘No Happiness Other than Serenity’ (2018; exhibition catalogue, p. 10), whose ironic title refers to a slogan painted on the gate of a Nabua temple used as a detention centre for suspected Communists in 1965. His *Sequence* [ผลสืบเนื่อง] series includes ‘What a Wonderful World: Parallel Side of the Red Gate’ (another deeply ironic title), which depicts the view that the two anti-Thanom activists saw as they were hanged from a red gate in 1976 (2018; *ibid.*, p. 15). (The painting was inspired by the documentary *The Two Brothers*.)

<sup>60</sup> *A Ripe Volcano* [ภูเขาไฟพิโรธ] was directed by Taiki Sakpisit and Yasuhiro Morinaga.

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