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Issue 2: Autumn 2008: Spanish Avant-Garde Film

Head or Tail

Review Posted: 08 Oct 08

Head or Tail is an exhibition of contemporary video works from Thailand, first shown in Dublin last fall as part of an exchange between Pallas Contemporary Projects and Project 304, a non-site project-based arts organization in Bangkok. Fittingly, *Head or Tail* had its first exclusive

screening in the west of Ireland at G126 Gallery in late May; like G126, Project 304 originally started as an alternative space run by artists and curators. '*Hua rua Goy*' or 'Head or Tail' is a term Thais use to describe the uncertainty of the situation or simply to gamble with the future. These selected media and video works are concerned with time. Dynamic tension plays out between past and present, as the possibilities and pitfalls of modern life in Southeast Asia are assessed. Yearning, alienation, and dark humor typify the work, where the future is always becoming beyond the toss of a die.

Nontawat Numbenchapol's *BKK Noise* is an audiovisual diary of Bangkok. This is a disjointed, smudgily focused, irregularly paced journey through bright lights, bright noise, as viewed from cars, through fence-mesh, into subway windows that briefly, unclearly, reflect the diarist, a moment-shadow of the ever-elusive flâneur 'at work'. The work may suffer from its casual way of seeing, but captures a sense of the city and its tempo.

In *Dotscape*, Sutthirat Supaparinya transfigures the diary format: a mechanical buzz accompanies a non-linear series of softly pixilated tableaux. Gerhard Richter's photo-referenced paintings come to mind. Shapes morph, pulsing with potential; patterns abstract the landscape with the subtlety of chain-link fencing; dots leap or fly. Was that a bird? But there is nothing luminous or even naturalistic about this world; modernity has altered 'normal' vision, the visual field reduced to graphic effects.

In *Visual Pollution*, Kraisak Choonhavan erases billboards in still shots, in a sometimes gratifying photoshopped re-imagining of a post-advertising city. The point is made quickly, progressing into a somewhat tediously repetitive exercise. More so, despite the attempted beautification, the work has the secondary effect of revealing the city as an alienating carapace of faceless office buildings, indistinct memorials, and freeways extending toward somewhere else.

Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit's *Bangkok Tanks* is a humorously provocative look at responses to media coverage of the 2006 coup d'etat in the Thai capital. Fuzzy TV news footage is superimposed with an excerpted internet chat among young Thais, while a catchy pop song provides the soundtrack. Outrageous screen names (e.g. rapemeplease) comment on CNN and BBC reports (which are later proved wrong), burning CDs and the hope that school will be cancelled the next day. One is reminded of T.S. Eliot: 'So much intuition lost through knowledge / So much knowledge lost through information / So much information lost through publicity / So much lost through living.'

'*Santiphap*' is Thai for 'peace'. Santiphap Inkong-ngam's *From Santiphap to Santiphap* is a 'prayer' for peace narrated by people named Santiphaps, who exhort the viewer to 'contribute good intentions' while hazy, idyllic scenes of water, sky, and trees unfold. The nature of these good intentions is left obfuscated by a lushly romantic aesthetic, which visually immerses the viewer in an amorphous natural world, where we do not have to bravely examine the economic and historical conditions that obstruct meaningful definitions of peace.

More interesting is Nitipong Tintubthai's study of innocence and power, *Krasob*. A group of boys practice Muay Thai moves on a stuffed rice bag hanging from a rafter in a yard. The still, singular camera's view eerily recalls scenes from *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2006). At first, the dialogue concerns their play-victim ("Kick to the head" "Kick his head!"), but eventually they turn on each other. They compare the effectiveness of their violence: "Can he punish as hard as me?" As the action progresses in this otherwise calm neighborhood, one boy attempts to mediate who can play, ostracizing one playmate and then another. Play becomes an anarchic struggle for domination, the boys skirmishing for freedom or control. The dominant boy is abandoned; "See, no one wants to play with you." In the video's last minute, he is seen in the background, chasing the others with a big stick, screaming "Die!" You laugh, and then gulp.

Chulayarnnon Siriphol's *Sleeping Beauty* is not a traditional documentary; the filmmaker is silent, shooting from shadows, through windows, behind a fan, creeping on the subjects as they sleep, somewhere between reality TV and surveillance. At the film's centre is a senile old woman and her family. People eat, watch TV, bathe the grandmother. All the while radio or TV offers the constant promise of a better world with herbal medicine drinks and sermons on accepting change. The viewer is lured into the ritual of the everyday and finally absence provides the narrative charge; when the house is empty, one wonders: Has the old woman died? Are they at hospital? Or on holiday? We wait for inhabitants to return, while the camera roams the house, studying its architecture, a whining pet dog, a lizard roaming the living room, family photos. Here, the old woman as a beautiful young woman. Here the daughter, as a baby. Here, the family, younger, seemingly happier. The house takes on immense proportions, when viewed from inside at such intense detail; "outside" is irrelevant, no longer a working context. A meditation on aging and family, *Sleeping Beauty* has the quietly self-critical, poetic ethnographic style of Trinh T. Minh-ha's seminal work, *Reassemblage* (1983), which resists the idea of interpretation as explanation by a privileged producer/viewer.

Learning Thai is an entirely different work, purporting to poke fun at itself, only to reveal the pitfall of work that uses national identity as a given. In the opening scene, a Thai man instructs an American woman on the pronunciations of Thai words for numbers, greetings, art, shirt, and progresses to "fuck you" and "asshole", in the familiar game of 'teach the foreigner dirty words'. More instructions unfold: how to dance, how to cook, etc., as the two participants get to know each other. The viewer is left unenlightened by what is essentially an obvious cultural investigation.

But perhaps that is the point: what it means to be Thai cannot be learned from a video. More importantly, the idea of being Thai, or Irish, must now be evaluated in a globalized economy. *Head or Tail* reveals the potential of transnational art exchanges for Ireland. That the more obvious cultural and linguistic issues are not an issue is a testament to the strength of the work, as well as to its universality. It gives one hope that a truly post-national arts identity can rise above such provincial concerns as a "true" Irish or Thai art.

- *Phillina Sun*

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