

Sopawan Boonnimitra

Time Storage

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The cinema (like photography) has a privileged relation to time, preserving the moment at which the image is registered, inscribing an unprecedented reality into its representation of the past. This, as it were, storage function may be compared to the memory left in the unconscious by an incident lost to consciousness. Both have the attributes of the indexical sign, the mark of trauma or the mark of light, and both need to be deciphered retrospectively across delayed time.

Laura Mulvey¹

1.

Unlike space, in which one can see physical or material boundaries, time is in constant movement and abstraction. Photography enables us to freeze time, and its stillness becomes an index of past time. The cinematic image provides an index in which time moves from one point to another and the ability to constantly move back and forth in time. Through the digital media particularly, where time can be stopped, rewound or fast-forwarded, as well as technologies such as closed-circuit television or the Internet, we come to experience time in the most non-linear way, and it also alters our experience of seeing both the photograph and the cinematic image. We experience what could be called 'delayed time', and cinema perhaps best demonstrates that experience as Mulvey suggests, in relation to the idea of 'delayed cinema', which in one respect refers to "the delay in time during which some detail has lain dormant, as it were, waiting to be noticed"²

1. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd 2006, p. 9.
2. *Ibid* p. 8

In a similar manner, Gilles Deleuze's (1989) idea of 'time-image' offers us a way to see movements as subordinate to time. Time-image, according to Deleuze, is that in which the aberrant movement does not take place in a unified time-space, but in direct images of time in which the aberrant movement becomes the norm, which may generate many undecidable moments that cannot easily be identified or understood.³ Following Deleuze's 'time-image', Daniel Frampton further suggests that "the time image, in its 'aberration of movement', is not of our perception or thought being a furtherance or parallel thinking. This suspension of the world gives the visible to thought in that it replaces our regular vision (thought) of the world with a different view."⁴

It is through these lines of thought that *Memory of the Last Supper* and *The Missing Trilogy* are to be viewed, comprehended, and experienced. It is in the moment that has been opened up through 'time-image' or 'delayed cinema' that we begin to see the construction of home in its 'temporality' instead of 'spatiality'. It is also in this moment that the 'indexical sign, the mark of trauma' or the 'mark of light' in film and photography, as Mulvey suggests, can arrive at some kind of meaning. These are moments of in-between states that are as yet unsettled, where one could re-imagine an identity and a home. In such a moment, the notion of 'home' is no longer a static point of reference in time and space for identity to be mapped out, but a time when the notion of 'home' could be understood through what I have called *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* (sometimes closed-sometimes open). Through *Memory of the Last Supper* and *The Missing Trilogy*, the notion of home that is unsettled through space, and particularly through time, will be explored in relation to the figure of immigrants/migrants, a visible body of the other in a 'home' whose physical and mental constructions, meanings and ideologies have been destabilized in our contemporary society.⁵ The two works are interdependent in terms of subject, theme and context, as well as the way in which time is related to.

2.

With images of war-torn countries and acts of terrorism shown side by side, many Western countries have tried to tighten their borders and security measures out of fear of foreigners/the others. Host countries have developed hard-line policies towards immigrants, including long application processes and increased security at many detention centres. It is in this in-between home, be it a detention centre, a refugee centre or a temporary shelter, while awaiting the result of their application, that immigrants face the uncertainty of being rejected or accepted. It is this uncertain state or moment of becoming a citizen, in an in-between home, that I want to capture in *Memory of the Last Supper*.

By asking them about the memory of their last supper, they have the choice of going back, recollecting the past and bringing that moment, through taking photographs, into the present, or being in the present state of here and now. It is a moment of now that mirrors their situation, in which they are unable to move forwards or backwards, of being in between both space and time. It is what makes possible the gap or the pause in time, being able to look back into the past, and possibly into the future. According to Roland Barthes, in photography "time's immobilization assumes only an excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engorged".⁶ This engorgement of time makes it possible for *Memory of the Last Supper* to create a delayed image through the aesthetics of delay between the real event of the last supper and the re-imagined one, the

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The time-image*, London: Athlone Press, 1989, p. xii.

4. Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy*, London: Wallflower Press, 2006, pp. 69-70.

5. The concept of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is extensively explored in the thesis. Further information can be found on the website: www.leavetoremain.com

6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1980, p. 91.

past and present home, the present and future home, reality and representation, and between the surface and the subtext.

It is in this delayed image that 'the mark of trauma' could resurface. It is a point at which the memories of the immigrants' last suppers are usually traumatic, marking the moment of departure from family and homeland. Here one could borrow Mulvey's argument in pointing to the correlation between the aesthetics of delay and the relationship between trauma and exegesis in psychoanalysis, as she writes:

*"Lacan's category of 'the Real' refers to the actuality of a traumatic event, personal or historical. The mind searches for words or images that might translate and convey that reality. But its translation into 'Symbolic' form and into consciousness separates the two, just as an account of a dream is separated from the time of dreaming and loses its original feeling."*⁷

The images stand for something of that 'untranslatability' of the fleeting moment, unsettling the notion of 'home'. It is also an attempt to inscribe the multiple layers of those moments between the 'traumatic past' and the 'uncertain future', between the banality of the question and the mythical, religion-laden symbolism of the last supper, between the past and future. These delayed moments allow us to take a mental journey back in time and to try to make some sense of them through temporality.

3.

While *Memory of the Last Supper* is an attempt to make a mental journey back in time, *The Missing Trilogy* is an attempt to make a mental journey forward in space in order to construct a home. The wedding that is supposed to be a happy ending in the conventional narrative becomes the beginning of the end, the point of departure. Instead of beginning to build a home together, physically and metaphorically, 'home' for the new couple is to be delayed into the unknown future.

The two illegal immigrants decide to get married when the woman is allocated to a third country, in the hope that this will make it possible for them to reunite. Instead, the man's attempt to join his wife is refused, as the marriage is not initially believed by the authorities, who see it as a fraud, a fake intimacy without meaning. The narrative then comes to a pause and its progress is delayed. He is engulfed in the moment of uncertainty, of waiting. Time seems to stand still. It is in this delay of the narrative that Deleuze's idea of 'time-image' comes through. Instead of movements or actions moving the narrative forward, the film looks back in time. The passage of time is felt as the husband waits for the reunion for what seems like an eternity.

The different temporal orders in each of the three screens creates the tension between present time, past time, and possibly time in the future, disrupting the flow of conventional narrative time and opening up possible multi-narratives that play off each other, in which the wedding could either be the happy ending to the traumatic past or it could only be possible in the imagination, and so on. Each of the screens provides a missing link to the narrative that may never be completed because of the lost origins. One always desires to fill in the gap left by those lost beginnings.

7. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006, p. 128.

The two works, *Memory of the Last Supper* and *The Missing Trilogy*, are to be seen in conjunction, interacting and interrelated in time, in a way that “the flow of the image at 24 frames a second tends to assert a ‘now-ness’ to the picture, [and] stillness allows access to the time of the film’s registration, its ‘then-ness’”.⁸ It is in the gap created from the juxtaposition of two different natures, between the ‘nowness’ and ‘thenness’, ‘still’ and ‘moving’, that perhaps one could understand the dynamic of the notion of ‘home’ experienced by the immigrants through this *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* of time.

In Response to Memory of the Last Supper:

Sarat Maharaj:

During the presentation I recognised the ways in which the singularity of Boonnimitra’s viewpoint as a researcher comes through. This question, “What memory do you have of your last supper?”, is not a question that a sociologist would have asked. The question that would be asked by the gentle bureaucratic order would be: what was your last point of departure? Or what was your last nationality? What was your last set of support systems, as it were? The very particularity of this question is that it asks such a doggedly mundane thing; it is a very ordinary experience you have been asking these people to recall. But the memory of the last supper has of course in itself, as a phrase, a very powerful symbolic load to it. That interested me straight away, that is, the promise or the possibility or the potential for some transformation such as one understands the last supper. Because it is that moment of transfiguration that is promised in that supper if one goes down that road of the symbolic order. But if you go down the road of the mundane, these are ordinary people and you’re asking them to recall a very personal, lived memory. I find it extremely interesting that we have these two orders rubbing up against each other. And it is precisely in showing the unsquarability of these two orders that you begin to pry open the space in the inquiry that will not be captured at all by someone carrying out sociological research or anthropological research or research into the legal status of these transients. So for me that is extremely interesting. What I am getting at is the question of if there is a particular standpoint from which an artist can begin an inquiry that is different from the narrative and analytical standpoints, the standpoint of inquisition, taken up by other disciplines? So I think what one is trying to argue here is that there are some specific issues that fall through the net of academic thinking, of disciplinary thinking, of established departmental thinking, which can be picked up by art practitioners. The point is that the madness or craziness of the question might be the interesting bit, because we’re seeing two or three other issues at play here.

One of them has to do with the production of illegality, now the dominant element in the executive sphere of contemporary society. There is a whole terminology—“illegal,” “clandestine,” “sans-papiers”—used to capture the identity of the individuals like those in Samut Sakhon . But it is not identity that Boonnimitra seems to be interested in. That, I found, was a new element in her thinking and a very interesting and encouraging one. She looked backwards in her sources to Michel Foucault, but I was thinking that perhaps the concept of “the exodus” in Paolo Virno’s work comes closer to the notion of becoming

8. Ibid, p. 102

that Boonnimitra is dealing with. What is that moment in the condition of movement from A to B where one is totally in a state of uprootedness? When one has left something, but hasn't arrived, between departure and arrival . . . before one develops some sort of identity and thus becomes part of the structures of normality.

But in that moment of illegality lies the uncertainty, the sense of being neither one thing nor the other and that's where the concept of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* comes through, in describing this in-between condition of being neither one thing nor the other. I really wanted to search for a non-western concept through which one might interrogate and explore this situation. And I am thinking of the Buddha himself, when asked: what then is this consciousness you talk about? What is the state of critical consciousness that you're referring to? Is it this? Is it that? And the Buddha replies, "*neti, neti, neti*", meaning "not this, not that, not the other," therefore pointing to a condition of indeterminacy. And it is this indeterminacy, which refuses to settle into any actual formed position and therefore refuses to take up an identity that becomes the interesting point of that particular expression.

I don't want to repeat the word "indeterminate" too much, though. Because the minute we do so, these words themselves begin to become rather fixed conceptual furniture. This traps us in the world of conceptualization, discourse, language and thinking through "what is ready-made in language?" and therefore there is always a moment when you have to go beyond that network in which we are trapped, that network of language. So again, becoming indeterminate, let us then, because we have to use words for today, but we constantly have to move beyond that. And that beyond for me is precisely the visual elements that are explored and gathered by Boonnimitra in her work. This is not visual in order to illustrate. This is not visual in order to simply back up the concept. But this is the visual again, like the phrase "memory of the last supper," which rubs up against the linguistic and shows that it is unsquarable. That there is something that doggedly remains, which cannot be brought into language and will always be in excess of that particular linguistic formulation. And that is where it seems to me that she as a practitioner, as an artist, is bringing something new to this field of knowledge production, knowledge acquisition. If we say that the visual arts today, contemporary art, is a modality of knowledge production then we are asked the second question: what sort of knowledge? We have to unpack what the visual actually enables in the situation.

Perhaps the last point I would like to make is that Hannah Arendt indicated that the figure of the refugee would be the figure of the twentieth century. We understand the century through the image of the refugee, a person in exodus, who has left but not arrived. But of course we know that the majority of immigrants we talk about are very keen to get there. They want to arrive. We need to keep those markers in our mind and then try to understand that there are many different journeys that refugees make, and not pack them all in one highly romantic idea and derive from it a critique only of the limitations of our society. We must look at it also from the point of view of the aspirations and desires of the refugees themselves, and often all they want is passage from A to B. That is the mundane dimension of the question "memory of the last supper." Are we romanticizing then the image of that moment of becoming? Are we deriving so much meaning out of it that we are talking louder than the experience of the refugee him/herself? That's a question I want to ask. In the

refugee we have begun to see all the ideals that have been missed or failed in the political sphere as we lived it as proper citizens. As if it is in the failed citizen, the refused citizen, in the non-citizen that there resides a body of values that we want somehow to recuperate. I think that would be a rather simplistic way of thinking of this set of issues. Instead, I ask how could we seek out the powerful ultimate horizon opened up by the presence of difference? I think that's why we have to shift roles and find a way of stripping our own identities bare and learn to listen. I am quoting a friend of mine, Gayatri Spivak, who says: learn to listen from below the line of the NGO, I guess, below the line of visibility. And I heard her giving this lecture and I asked her: "Gayatri, I always wondered what sort of posture is the body in when you are actually exactly listening below this line of visibility? Are we kneeling? Are we crouching? Are we flat on our back? How are we listening to the other, the refugee, when we shut up and we try to listen to what the refugee is actually desiring?" My way of putting it is not in terms of posture, which I think is a fantastic way in which she somehow imagines the relationship with difference in our midst. My way of putting it is just to make sure that we are not talking louder than the refugee. And in that sense, that we are not over-interpreting, deriving such a powerful derivation out of the situation of refugees that we leave them high and dry and their aspirations, their day-to-day needs for security, for education, for comfort, for friendship, for society, whatever their ideas may be... And that's what I mean by the unsquarability of these positions in which we find ourselves.

And what I am thinking is that beyond Hannah Arendt's observation, the figure of our time is no longer the figure of the refugee, but the figure of the terrorist. The terrorist too is not able to live with difference. The terrorist says: become like me or I blow you and myself up. And that refusal or the incapacity to deal with difference is the one we have to struggle with. I am not saying that this is uncontroversial, but I think this is the kind of perspective that is mapping out at the moment. That figure of the terrorist must define that moment of non-communicable communication, that moment when something is being communicated, but there is refusal to use language, it is a refusal to live. There is in fact only negation that is offered. That one blast of nothingness must be contrasted to the negation of "*neti, neti, neti*", which is a negation of a different order. I speak of a creative negation against nihilism, in which we are able to invoke difference, to see how things are different.

And don't forget the art dimension. It is not just simply critical discursive thinking and analytical thinking that we are concerned with, but we're also concerned with perception and intensities. We're forced to use language to describe what we are concerned with, and also the visual. But as you know one of the exercises I've done with a class in Sweden, in particular, is to give students the footnotes to Deleuze's *Rhizome* essay, since it is so much discussed. Everyone explains the world through the *Rhizome* model; we see migration through the *Rhizome* network. We try to understand the indeterminate through the *Rhizome*. So I said to this class: "Do not read this essay. Cut it out and put the body of the essay in one box and then cut the footnotes out of the essay and cut each footnote into a strip in the way that someone like Daniel Spoerri would have done. Mix it up and then drop it and then use the strips. Paste them together in an order that you like and then reconstruct the essay by extrapolating from the footnotes." Of course people do come up with a lot of rubbish, but nevertheless, the interesting thing is that it undermines and destabilizes the ready-made

reading with which one is going to approach that particular text. It undermines the set of preconceptions within an inquiry.

And that's another thing Boonnimitra is really concerned with. In mapping what is possible in the Netherlands, you find that, of course there is a network of NGOs already, but that the NGOs are to some extent a little bit uneasy that they form a very neat counter universe to the governmental organizations. And it is this neatness that seems to worry us and therefore you have to begin other ways of understanding. You have to cut out the footnotes, mix them up, throw them together. Footnotes suggest scholarship, they suggest an ordered mind, they suggest a methodology of procedure and so on. But they never reclaim the lived experience, the actual contributions of those who might have contributed to the making of a world of knowledge. I am constantly trying to get back to the fact that this is research, and what is the nature of this research? That is a question that I am hoping that maybe you want to ask and want to discuss a little bit now. Because what we are seeing across Europe is a standardization of the art education system. We see through the Bologna process the introduction of the BA, MA and PhD as a model for art education and the making of the career of the artist. And that is a thing that is not odd to us, coming from the other side of the English Channel, but then we are semi-detached from Europe and so for us it's been a thirteen-year history of doing research within PhDs in visual arts practice. Here, there is simply no question anymore in the academic world or the non-academic world that it is possible to be a researcher through visual art? Nobody asks: Are you trying to pretend you're a scientist? All these questions that are still being debated in parts of Europe. The issue here is something you might want to explore, even with Boonnimitra herself, since she is one of the first people to have done a PhD under the Bologna rules. And what about the idea of why should an artist feel that he or she can conduct an inquiry that can produce new knowledge and what is the status of that knowledge vis-à-vis other disciplines? I think that's the issue that comes out of this, if I may institutionalize the question a bit or put it back into the politics of the institutions of education since so much of the other commentary I made was on the philosophical and more theoretical level.

In fact I think the point that the presentation began with, that in asking what the systems of knowledge do not ask, one is opening up a space for new knowledge and in the production of that new knowledge, you see the role of the artist-researcher. And this is why it could be so important not to see art research as simply translating philosophy back into the world of art. It would not be right to simply see it as importing theoretical concepts from all the other disciplines and, as some people have felt, intellectualizing the artist. That would be a complete mistake. In a funny way, Duchamp's famous statement that he would try to make it so that nobody will ever be able to say "as stupid as an artist." Maybe today we have to reclaim that stupidity that he was so keen to dispense with, because the journey out of that stupidity has possibly led us to an over-intellectualization of an external kind, or that's the tendency in our institutions. How can we revalidate the activity of art itself and see the activity itself as a probe into the production of knowledge and new knowledge. And the example I give is precisely the question that Boonnimitra poses about the refugees. Elsewhere she might well use, in an eclectic way, in a very messy way, the questionnaires, the facts and figures gathered by the United Nations, by the Euro-bureaucracies of the statistical knowledge that is gathered in Brussels. We

could well use that. There's no harm in that. That's one way of thinking the world, one way of mapping. But there are other questions that need to be asked and in bringing in something like that I think you begin to question the processes of validation of what is knowledge. So for me that is one of the key issues in framing the disciplinary validity of art practice. It is not an add-on to the disciplines, nor on the other hand is it a solution that art should be academicized in order to look respectable to the other disciplines. It is finding in art itself a mode of thinking, thinking in, with and through art practice. How could that be done? I don't know; there are many instances of it. I find the minute you try to establish it as a law of philosophy, you have contradicted yourself in a way. That there is something in art itself that allows us to make very limited, very modest claims out of it and I think we must hold on to that modesty. And not attempt to establish a whole new discipline called – we use the phrase art research – but there is language again, and its trap.

The following artworks:

No 1. Memory of the Last Supper, 2007

No 2. Memory of the Last Supper, 2007

No 3. Memory of the Last Supper, 2007







Interview

Mika Hannula: Let's start with the basics. What is your background as an artist and how did you get involved and interested in doing a PhD in practice-based artistic research?

Sopawan Boonnimitra: I started out as a filmmaker. It was through my research at Goldsmiths on the issues of space & sexuality that I began to explore other possibilities for involving my practices in the process of research. During the research, I felt there was always something that was difficult to explain through written words or through a particular medium, especially in my research where the main concepts of space and gender themselves are already rather fluid. I was particularly interested to search for an alternative arrangement of space in relation to homosexuality, and in its ambiguous quality. Therefore it was important not to fix the meaning and structure of space in any particular way.

It was after I transferred to Malmö Art Academy that I had an opportunity to use different visual practices, which I feel has enabled me to explore some of the areas that cannot be discussed through one particular channel, and possibly to capture the ambiguity of the quality of the space that I have attempted to demonstrate. This also opened up the way in which I can incorporate my practices into the research, and vice versa. Artistic research to me is not a readymade method that I took on, but one that has come to me in different ways throughout the years.

MH: Can you be a bit more precise about your background as a filmmaker? What kind of films did you make, and how would you contextualize yourself in that field? What would you say are the differences between you working in the field of contemporary art in comparison to film - or are there any?

SB: I did try my hand at many things, from working on big-budget feature films to the more independent modes of documentary, to video art. It was in the period right about 1995 to the end of the 1990s that I had tried to find suitable modes to express and communicate my thoughts and concerns. I find narrative a very useful method, but it is not the only way to communicate. I personally do not think film and contemporary art are two different domains. They have always remained in close contact and influenced each other. Throughout history, film has been tried and tested in many different ways, and art has been one particular area in which the film medium has been thoroughly integrated, as can be seen in the history of avant-garde cinema. Many artists and filmmakers have long been working across genres and boundaries.

For me, working in the field of contemporary art, it's not only about having more tools to choose from, particularly in the lens-based media that nowadays make up a large part of the contemporary-art scene. I am particularly interested in space and time in lens-based media. My works are always concerned with these two aspects. When working in the usual mode of narrative film, these two aspects may be confined within the framework of the narrative, but working in the contemporary-art field allows me the freedom to exploit them and their potential.

MH: Let me ask two more questions related to your background before we focus on the content, the themes of your work. You mentioned that you studied at Goldsmiths. Can you tell me a bit of the background why you chose to go there, and what are the main differences between art schools in Europe and in Thailand?

SB: I was interested in Goldsmiths at the time because of its reputation in contemporary art. I was looking to expand outside the domain of filmmaking, and I wanted a place that could help me do that.

Looking back, let's say ten years ago, most of the art schools here in Thailand were still focussed on traditional arts. There were still areas that had been left out, and contemporary arts certainly were one of them. There might be some contemporary Thai artists that have made a name on art scenes abroad, but many of them lived and were educated abroad. There were no established institutions to properly support and foster the contemporary arts. Although the situation is quite different today, partly due to the overall interest in contemporary art in the region, as well the surge of interest in Asian arts. In the last decade, many art schools have turned their interest to contemporary arts, as well as many new galleries that respond to the new interests.

This new phenomenon and change has derived from several factors. I think there has been a change in the arts, as well as in many traditional cultures, as they have obviously been influenced and affected by the process of globalisation and capitalism. At the same time, they have benefited from the interest in the discourses of others in the last few decades, so that the arts in different parts of the world have become a recent focus of Western interest. Arts and cultures have always been used as a means of national expression and as a way to construct the nation's identity internationally, as well as to be economically viable, since the development of art cinema in the 60s.

I think much the same movement has taken place in the arts in the 1990s, where instead of international film festivals the art biennales have been used as a venue for internationalising countries' own cultures. With many countries that are experiencing economic success in Asia, such as Korea, Japan, China and Singapore, the art biennales have been a testament to their cultural advancement among the international community. In hindsight, they have internationalised the local arts that help generate a lot of interest in contemporary arts within and outside the regions. Although there are certain issues that need to be looked at, as these events tend to include those artists who are already internationalised, and to give quite little room for arts from within the regions. There are certain dilemmas for the organisers/curators of these events, as regards pleasing the international audience, and the need to look more closely at the benefit to the local people. The events would also need to go together with arts education within the regions before these art events could claim to benefit the majority of people within the region. Otherwise it would end up being only a playground for those who are privileged and consort with some form of cultural imperialism, both internal and external.

MH: You are also now acting as a research curator

SB: Yes. My involvement as a research curator in the Guangzhou Triennial (curated by Sarat Maharaj, Johnson Chang, Gao Shiming) with the theme *'Farewell to Postcolonialism'* is my first experience of being involved a major international art event. It is also a chance for me to focus my interest on Asian arts, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. I believe there is quite exciting art emerging from both regions, which have continued to grow for many years. I am particularly interested in the way in which they have been given a new perspective on their traditions. For example, the works by Huma Mulji from Pakistan that suggest the origins of violence, through street performances that are embedded in the tradition. Some of the works have inspired and confirmed my interest in Asian roots and are a testament to the changing atmosphere in contemporary art within the regions.

MH: After studying in two countries in Europe for a number of years, you chose to go back to Thailand. Was this something you planned to do from the beginning or...?

SB: I didn't feel it was an issue to return to my country or live elsewhere. I'm still doing what I want to do in Thailand. There is still a lot to learn and explore even in my home country. We no longer live in a Eurocentric world, especially in terms of art, there have been some exciting things outside Europe for some time. I don't think it would make much difference to live anywhere. Although my experience in Europe certainly brings in a fresh new look for my practice in Thailand. There are also many subjects that I would like to do in my country. It wouldn't be possible to live elsewhere.

MH: You mention there are these particular subjects or things that you can only do in your own country. What do you mean by this?

And then at the same time, to follow with a very large question. You said that your core interests have been the question or position of homosexuality, combined with the processes of how we shape and understand space. What exactly are you interested in here and where did it begin?

SB: There are many subjects that I would like to film in my country, that I would like to bring to public attention. I feel that there are still many issues and conflicts that need to be raised and dealt with, particularly through the film medium. I'm interested in the people who are on the fringe of society, like the illegal immigrants that I'm now focussing on. That is also why I was interested in the position of homosexuality. I have raised this issue partly due to my personal experience. I've always felt uneasy with the rigid sexual categories that have been forced upon us. But at the same time, while living in Thai society, where one needs to behave according to the place and time. In a way, it allows a space of ambiguity that can be a liberation rather than a limitation. Identity is then less important than how we behave and act in public. In this way, the way in which identity is understood, is also defined by space, and vice versa.

Let me try to give you an example connected to daily life. Thai people behave more or less according to the loose rule of *'kalatesa'* (kala – time, tesa – space) or according to the context. Behaviour is seen from the outer look or appearance, while the essence can be kept hidden. In other words, the 'surface'

or 'face' has become changeable in relation to time, place and the relationship with other people. For example, a gay man could behave in a masculine way while in public, and can behave in contradictory ways in private or among the gay community. As long as he conforms to *'kalatesa'* he is still considered to be a man. Identity has become no more than a role that can be put on according to the space and time. It is unlike the notion of the 'self' in the West. I think it has something to do with Buddhist philosophy, which places no importance on the essence of things, as there is none.

I felt this was quite a unique situation in Thailand where these kinds of ambiguity are allowed to take place. More importantly I felt at the time that Thailand, and probably Asian countries as a whole, were on the verge of a change. It was in the period when the old tradition was still struggling to hold onto its power, while the new could not be contained or swept under the rug. I wanted to look closely into the situation, as well as to study the mechanism of different factors of space, time, activities, sexuality, combined to produce the kind of ambiguity that allows the erasure of categories/boundaries to take place. Although many circumstances have changed in the last ten years since I raised the issue, with the increased visibility of homosexuals, both in public space and media, having shaped a new understanding among Thais and in other places.

These two subjects of homosexuality and immigration may seem a world apart, but for me they are similar in a way and connected to me both personally and socially, with my experiences as a foreigner in other countries having also raised my awareness of being an outsider.

MH: Let's continue with one of these main themes of your work - choosing to get into detailed discussions on the issue of immigrants. Can you tell me – through an example in your work – about a case in which you have worked on this issue, how it began, what you did, how you got in touch with the people, and how you showed it in an exhibition – and also what kind of reactions you have got to it in Thailand.

SB: My awareness of space and time, which comes from my interest in the issue of homosexuality, has extended and changed over time. I am particularly interested in the way in which space and time have contributed to the particular condition that allows one identity to be unfixed, as well as to allow different contradictory factors to coexist. I use the Thai term *'lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd'* (sometimes closed-sometimes open) in an attempt to grasp its nature. I've been trying to explore through different kinds and levels of space, to look for such particular conditions that could also happen beyond the realm of sexuality.

I think it is particularly significant in recent times, when the elements of time and space have become a factor in the way we define ourselves, as well as the nation, as we have witnessed in many places. Particularly in my recent witness to the current conflict between Thailand and Cambodia on the overlapping boundary of the sacred Preah Vihear Temple. While either side is trying to claim ownership, which produces a conflict between the countries, it seems the fixed boundary has increasingly raised a lot of questions. Perhaps we'd better find something more desirable, something in-between, like a trans-boundary, that may be the best solution for today's situation. So it is not strictly the things that happen in relation to sexuality that I'm interested in.

In my later works in England, as an outsider myself, I was drawn to people who are in a similar position to mine, although our positions as outsider maybe derive from different factors. It was natural that my interest in the issue of immigration has been raised through my association with different people, many of them are my friends, as well as my interest in space. When being in a foreign land or when being in a place where you do not belong, even in your own country, the experience may not be much different. That was why I was interested in people living in a diaspora, which I explored in my two previous works, *Are You Local?* (2004) and *Feel It Like Home* (2004). In *Are You Local?*, I was working with a Thai transvestite who lives her life as a British housewife, and she has constructed her 'home' through her performance. In a similar manner, in *Feel It Like Home*, I was focussing on the conditions of people living in a diaspora and how the notion of home can also provoke a sense of unfamiliarity and strangeness.

So my interest in the issue of immigration has already been part of my exploration of the issue of homosexuality. After I came back to Thailand, I wanted to continue to work on the issue of 'home' and look further at the contemporary condition of home, which has been changed by many factors and players over the years. At the time, I was beginning to work with non-governmental organizations as a way to reach and get in touch with people with whom in normal circumstances it may not be possible to talk. It may be easier for me as an outsider/foreigner in England to reach people in the same situation. When I am in my own country the situation is reversed. In a way, here in Thailand I'm still an outsider who tries to look inside the other communities. My subject is still a continuing one of looking at immigrants. I was first interested in the Burmese immigrant communities, partly because of their recent media attention at the time, and also of the need for NGOs to get a better understanding of the situation of Burmese immigrants among Thai people. Although I have been researching and filming footage about



Are You Local?
2004



Feel It Like Home
2004



Burmese immigrants, especially in the town of Samutsakorn, which many people know as 'Little Burma', the project really took off when I was involved with the Research-in-Residence project at BAK in the Netherlands. There I started by working with NGOs and then I found my way to a few refugee centres. This resulted in the project called *Memories of the Last Supper*, which will be first shown properly in the Gothenburg exhibition. And from there the connection to the people that I get to know at the refugee centre has led me back to the immigrant communities in Thailand that I'm working with at the moment.

MH: Can you elaborate a bit more on the specifics of both works, *Memories of the Last Supper* and *Missing Trilogy* that will be shown in Gothenburg?

SB: Yes, while I was working with the issues of immigrants, I had a chance to extend my research in the Netherlands. At first, I was interested in the relationship between schizophrenia symptoms and the conditions of immigration. The Netherlands was one of the countries where that relationship has been explored in various studies. It led me to research further into the laws and the process of immigration in the Netherlands. There are different centres that are reserved for people at different stages of the application process for immigrants. I was particularly interested in the centres that function at a phase when they are waiting for a decision on whether they will be granted citizenship. While many people could be in the centres for many years, for others the centres are a mere transition space before they can move to their own assigned living space. It is in this in-between state, a kind of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* condition that the future is still unsettled and the past cannot be revisited, that the notion of 'home' has become a metaphor for psychological entanglement for the people involved. It is this condition that I explore in *Memory of the Last Supper*.

Through networks of NGOs and invisible networks of people, I have met Burmese immigrants and had a chance to interview those who have just arrived in the Netherlands a few months ago, from various refugee camps in Thailand, and to ask them to talk about the details of their last meal at home. I asked them to recall their last memory of their last supper at their original homes. When asked about their personal memory connected with their previous home, as well as their journeys from home, they have to negotiate between the lost time/space and the present time/space. I was intrigued by many of the stories they told, and by the way in which they constructed their stories. The journey of the immigrants, one of major importance in the history of the immigrants as well as in their memory, has also been provoked through the recollection of the events. They also produce a rather melancholic moment as regards the past, as well as uncertainties about future journeys.

Missing Trilogy is a fiction-film piece based on a real-life story of immigrants. I have been inspired by the people I have recently met through my works and research, and would like to retell their stories. It is through the web of relationships within the refugee camp, the Burmese, Iraqi, the Nepali and many more that I encountered in the Netherlands, that led me to the Nepali communities in Thailand. These kinds of invisible networks among minority groups occur across the globe, and in a way I think they have defined our contemporary society today.

Through the film narrative, and soon in real life, too, I try to reconnect a Nepali couple, across time and space. They have been separated by the departure of the wife from Thailand to the Netherlands, while the husband has been refused his application. I was quite engaged in their story and struggle, and would like to transpose their experience and memory onto film, both to immortalise the memory in a sense, and to bring about the element of time that has become a condition of their relationships, and the reunion of the family. As the name *The Missing Trilogy* suggests, the film also centres on the absent or the lost in many ways that are part of the different lives: the husband, the wife and the Burmese friends. Each of them are trapped in the in-between states of being returned or moving toward the new home, while the new family could be set up in an unfamiliar way.



The people I am interested in are in a similar situation in the way in which they do not fit neatly into any particular category. They are living between different terrains. They may not be exceptions, but they all have a kind of life drama that you can only discover when you have a chance to get to know them.

I at first used the film/digital medium as my tool for searching for something that is not visible to our eyes, and as a tool for getting to know people. In the same way, film can record a wide range of wavelengths that our eyes cannot see. It can perhaps act as a testimony to something that is lost or invisible in our everyday life. As well as using it as medium for getting to know them and study them closer, rather than just having a passing conversation. I was first using it to explore through the form of documentary, in an attempt to search for the invisible subject, homosexuality, in Thai society.

My works have gradually evolved beyond the traditional modes of filmmaking, in that I've tried to understand and explore their psyches beyond the geographical constraints, which has extended to my interest in exhibiting them in a way that can reflect the psychological complexity of their situation. As well as taking full benefit from being able to use the elements of space and time beyond the normal mode of exhibiting film or photography. By working in collaboration with architects, I have had input that enabled me to push my works further in the way I want. For example, in *Feel It Like Home*, the photographs are shown in an enclosed sculpture simulating photographic equipment. The audience has to look through a peep hole so that, at the same time, they also see a reflection of themselves. This is an act of intruding, of looking into someone's private space, and once you look inside you directly confront the gaze of the other, whose melancholic presence also evokes a psychologically complex interaction between the inhabitant and the outsider.

I haven't had a chance to show many of my works in Thailand, and one of the main reasons is that some of the works I have promised only to show outside the country. Why? Well, most of my films feature Thai people, and some of them may feel uneasy about having them shown in public. It is similar in the case of the immigrants that I've worked with, that they prefer their works to be shown in other communities outside of their own, or perhaps in different countries. However, recently, opinions have changed quite a lot, in these last few years in terms of homosexuality discourse, as I mentioned earlier.

I'm aiming to show the new series that I'm working on next year, these are the two pieces that I am showing now in Gothenburg that I will also show in Bangkok. I'm also working on another piece, also still on the issue of immigrants, but it depends on time. Last year, I organized a film festival in Bangkok around the issue of immigrants, as well as showcasing some of the works on Burmese immigrants that I have produced with my students. The films are mainly documentary and have been used by NGOs to further their cause with the government, and the results have been positive. I have just been allowed, along with my students, to film in the refugee camp at the border, and hopefully the films will be used to further the cause with the Ministry of the Interior.

I'm teaching in the Department of Motion Pictures and Photography at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. My main subjects are in filmmaking, ranging from a short filmmaking course to documentary filmmaking, as well as some theoretical courses. In my documentary course, besides exploring personal themes, I've also encouraged my students to work with social issues and with NGOs. Moreover, I've encouraged them to think beyond the realm or form of documentary. It is in this part of my teaching that I also incorporate my own works and use them as a means of research.

Feel it like home
2004

MH: Due to the current catastrophe in Burma/Myanmar, has that changed your way of working or dealing with the issue of immigrants? Or has the catastrophe changed the status or situation of the immigrants?

SB: Strangely the current catastrophe in Myanmar has little or no effect on the broader Burmese immigrant community in Thailand. Partly because a large number of people who left Burma did not originally live in the affected area. They mostly come from Burmese minority groups, such as the Karen and Mon, who are in conflict with the military government. If they are not from minority groups, they come from different parts of Myanmar that are less economically viable than the Irrawaddy Delta, where it was still possible to work and live despite the overall conflict and economic problems in the country. Although personally I believe this catastrophe will lead to another surge of immigrants moving through Thailand due to the hard living conditions.

MH: We'll continue with this term 'lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd' (sometimes closed-sometimes open) that you used in your dissertation. Can you say a bit more about where the term comes from and how you started to work with it or how you found it. Then, to the dissertation process and your graduation in 2006. Again, a big question, but let's start easily. When looking back now, after almost two years, how do you feel about:

- 1) the whole process
- 2) the show that you were part of with your work?

SB: Through my initial research into filmic representation as well as spatial representation in relation to Thai homosexuality, I have found the kind of conditions that I have explained before. I was looking at Western terms, such as 'third space' and 'other space' to try to describe and understand them. Although I found them inadequate in some ways, because of the absence of the elements of time that are also an important factor in the conditions. They may not suggest the temporal nature of the conditions. I also wanted a term that could explain the way in which contradictory things can take place simultaneously.

The term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is quite common in the Thai language. I was attracted by its slang usage to refer to homosexuals. I think the term better explains the idea of what I want to suggest. It also suggests how the element of time is a function in identity construction, and how the nature of identity is unsettled by it. I have also been influenced by Buddhist philosophy in relation to my thinking about time, which I think is also ingrained in the term. In Buddhist philosophy, the desirable time is always the present. It is in the moment of 'here' and 'now' that things can simultaneously take place. It also offers an alternative terminology and viewpoint from another specific location. I used the term as the starting point for exploring many possibilities of this condition through my works. Although I started to explore it in relation to sexuality, its implications could also extend to many subject matters, as my later works have shown.

Looking back to the whole process, I think my position was different from everyone else's, as I had been working on the research before I came to Sweden to do the course. So I think it may mean something different and work differently for each person. The period in Sweden was for me the test and trial period for the visual and subject matter. Particularly at the event in Bangkok, which comprises an art exhibition, film screening & competition, the conference was a chance to prove my case for how the term can help us understand

contemporary conditions that are not only restricted to the sexuality issue. The final exhibition, for me, is more or less a conclusion to certain chapters of my research. Instead of exploring further as in the Bangkok event, I had a chance to focus on the exhibition space in relation to my works, and on how the idea of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* could become an art experience.

MH: It's clear that each PhD project in any field has to be very specific and very individual as a process. In your particular case, now looking back, what would you say were the main positive chances and challenges, negative and unproductive sides of the whole process?

SB: In a positive way, I think it has given me a chance to look back at my process of working, as well as looking back into myself. It is also a way for me to look at art or films through their process instead of the end result, though that could also prove to be a negative side if you look at it from another discipline. What I have gained more than anything is the way in which I have tested and tried out and used different disciplines in my works. It does change the way I work and think. In a negative way, it would also be difficult to explain what I have learned or what I have gained concretely as I might have done in another discipline. It also opens a door for me to see how artists can engage with communities and social issues in productive and active ways. In a way, this is also a challenging task that I have given myself outside the framework of the PhD. I think what I am doing now is still pretty much the same. It is the same journey of learning, except without too much pressure.

Personally there was a sense of uncertainty about the degree, at some points, as a transfer student and without an example or a clear rule to follow at the time. In one way, it may be liberating to choose your own methodology, but in another way for some it could be discouraging, as the system of supports may not yet have been firmly laid.

MH: There must have been at least some pressure that you felt in being among the first three to graduate in Sweden. During that time, there was a rather low-level, opportunistic internal Swedish discussion going on, looking at the pros and cons of artistic research. One of the funniest questions I heard then was someone seriously thinking about whether a PhD project would make person X a better artist – as if one could measure such things, and as if it would be so simple. But what if we take this silly question seriously. How would you respond to it?

SB: To be honest, I think as an outsider I wasn't too aware of or pressured by the discussions that had been around. But, as you said, it would be rather ridiculous to say which is a particular way to be a better artist or just to be an artist. There has always been a variety of approaches, and bringing in such multiple disciplines into the area has given the arts an intriguing multi-disciplinarity. It's just the same as in other disciplines, that the PhD or, let's say, all the degrees, may not have proved the value of the person or added prestige to the discipline. It's only proven its value if something meaningful could be created, without considering the author or the artist, and seeing it as a meaningful, collaborative process.

MH: Let's finish with a large theme. How would you define research – again, not generally, but from your own personal and practical perspective?

SB: Looking back many years, it is quite difficult for me to explain what 'research' is. As I mentioned, it is not a readymade process that I took up, but one that I gradually learned. There are different methods that I took up during the project that could define my research as a whole. Once again, it is all about the process, which I could describe in different ways from my experience: it is a way to learn from others and not to expect specific results; it is the time of being there and being involved; it is how you make things happen in a meaningful way and are critical about it; it is how you learn to respect and listen to the differences; and so on.