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Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd

Contemporary urban conditions with special reference to thai homosexuality

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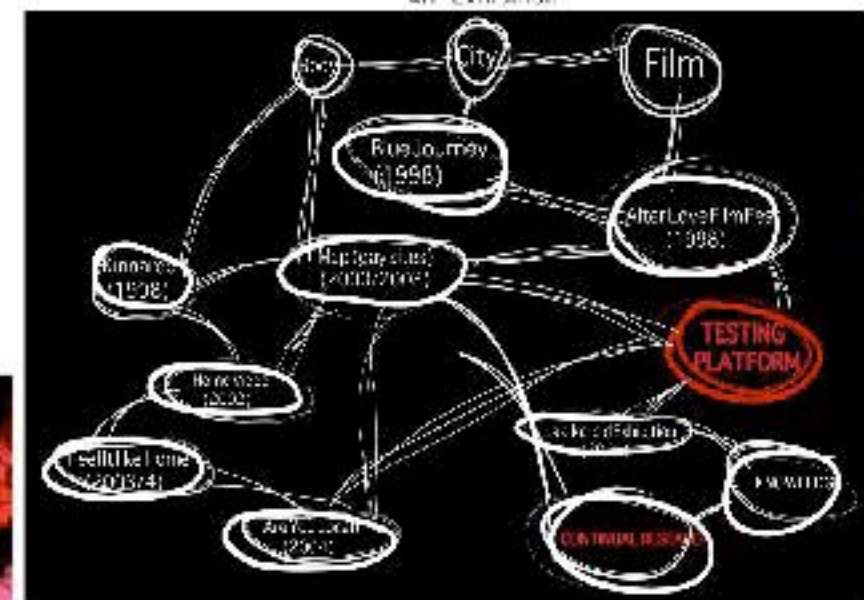
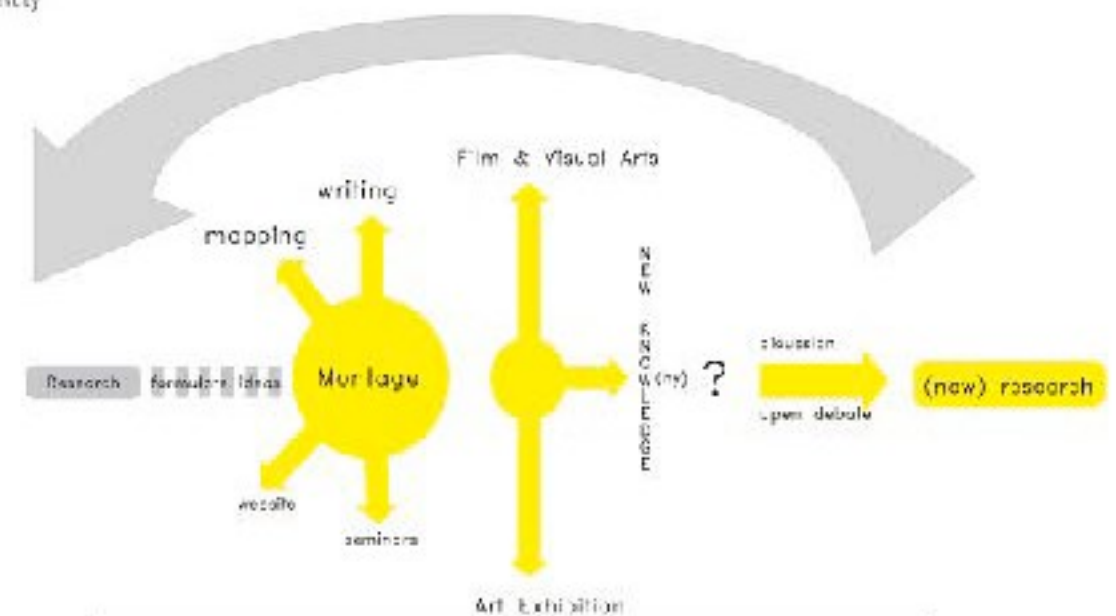
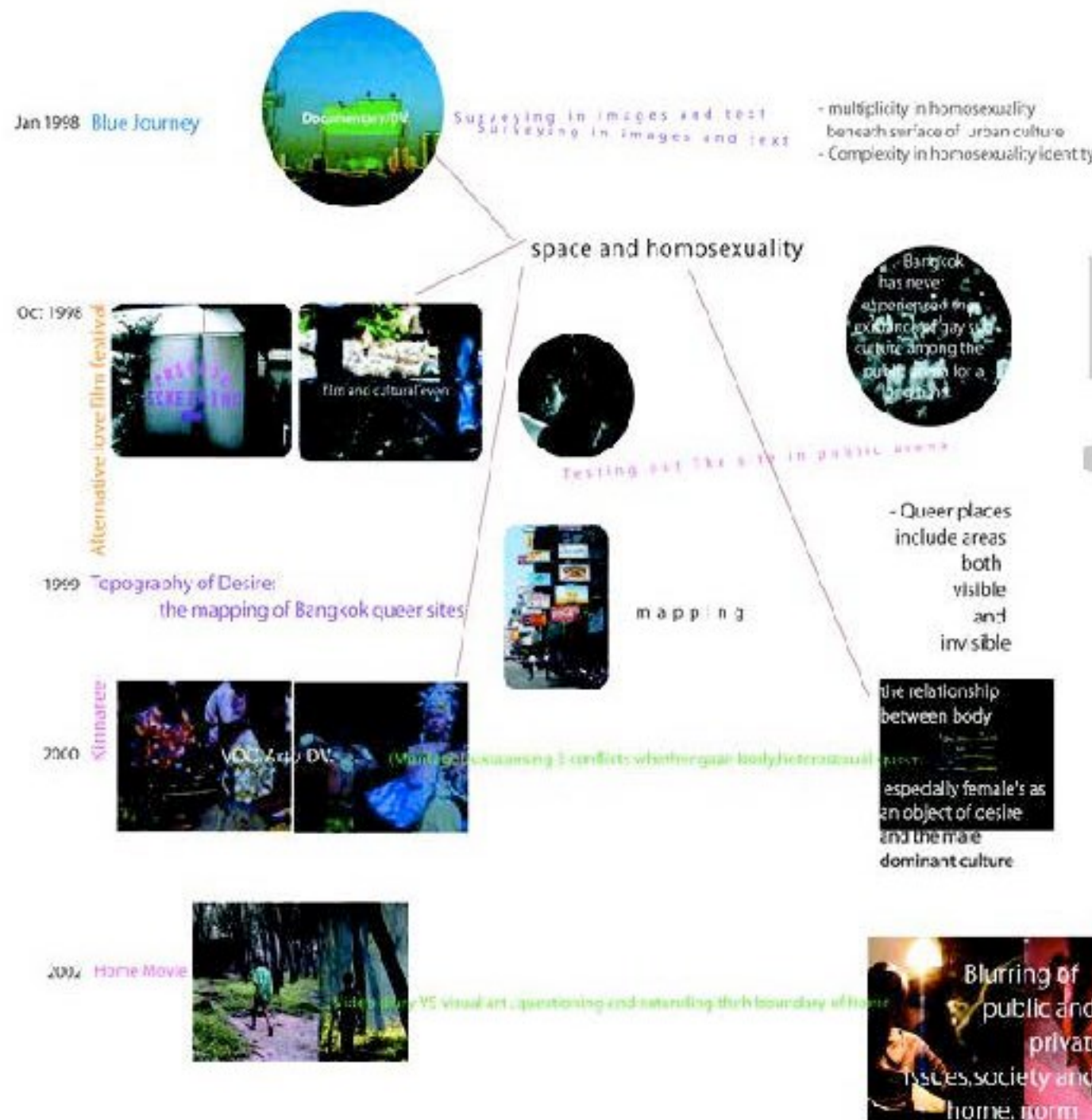
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Abstract

ABSTRACT

Major Asian cities like Hong Kong, Taipei and Bangkok have been constantly on the verge of rapid transformation, whether politically, socially, and particularly sexually, due to the process of capitalisation, modernisation, and globalisation over the last decade. In response to the impact of the transformation on the historical and traditional space of the city, the region's unique cultural and historical background has produced certain conditions of urban arrangements that may have put into disarray the traditional relationship between binary oppositions, whether tradition/modernity, old/new, global/local, heterosexual/homosexual, and the like. It is a kind of in-between condition that manifests itself through different scales and different levels, physically and metaphorically, of space. It is when the old meaning of spaces has been unfixed and the new one has not yet emerged fully that it leads to a multiplicity of meanings and functions that at times derive from contradictory ideologies.

Although much research has been undertaken on the new urban landscapes in Asia by urbanists and social geographers, there is still an area that needs to be further explored, particularly how these new urban landscapes and their conditions anticipate the process of generating creativity and alternative ways of living and thinking resulting from destabilised boundaries, in particular the sexual one. It is therefore the aim of this thesis to attempt to grasp, explain and interpret the contemporary urban conditions. In my effort to understand this rather unorthodox and complex condition that cannot be simply explained by the dominant mode of thinking based on binary opposition, I am aided by the Thai term lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd, literally meaning "sometimes closed-sometimes open", inspired by Thai ideology regarding space that is less fixated on physical boundaries, as well as a few influential ideas





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concerned with the nature of 'otherness', particularly Michel Foucault's 'heterotopia'. Nevertheless, it is not the intention of this project to establish another term to describe the contemporary urban conditions. The term is used as an initial attempt to open up an alternative way of thinking beyond the binary opposition. It also signifies the unsettling process of arranging oneself or a subject on any particular side of the binary. My use of the term will continue to question: what is left beyond if the relationship between spaces that has been set up by the fixed dualism of centre/periphery has been disrupted and possibly broken up? How can we build identity around such conditions? How can the various forces of power and their complex relationships be revealed and broken down through the understanding of the conditions?

I use lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd as both a means to explore and a terminology for these conditions manifesting themselves through different kinds of spaces, including the spaces of the city of Bangkok, the katoey body of the transvestite boxer, a group of queer Asian cinema, as well other related spaces within urban landscapes. I adopt different theories and methods in order to create a new paradigm of understanding, including artistic and non-artistic approaches, such as writing, photographing, mapping, video-making, curating, etc. In a sense, they will make of this thesis a metaphorical space, a platform for expressing, testing and reflecting ideas that are constantly shifting when new elements are added, as in the case of the new urban conditions.





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ROAD MAP

The research project "Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd" is an art research that has been done in and through arts in the area of spatial representation in relation to homosexuality. It intends to become a platform for producing and testing out different modes of thinking in visual fields. The following is the road map to take you to different phases of my research journey from October 1997 to the year 2006.





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DEPARTURE

There are films where you can't discover anything, where there's nothing to be discovered, because everything in them is completely unambiguous and obvious. And then there are other films, where you're continually noticing little details, films that leave room for all kind of possibilities.

Wim Wenders, *The Logic of Images*, p. 3

Right at the beginning of what was to become almost a decade of my life, I did not think much about how it might turn out to be, apart from a few hundred pages of writing, and then life would go back to normal, of not sitting in front of the computer for hours and hours. However, it turned out to be a long journey of thinking, living and breathing through the two obvious subjects of my study: space and homosexuality, with some filmmaking, photographing, writing, teaching and curating in between. It is a long way from my first thought of the thesis in which the films of 1970s New German Cinema director Wim Wenders would play a significant part, though I believe it is still his influence that leads me to search further into images that may inspire my imagination of space, as space is such a prominent feature in his films. With their vast landscapes and alienated characters on endless journeys, his films have brought back memories of my year in Utah when I was 15 years old and living with an elderly couple, where anywhere I went the Rocky Mountains were overwhelming. The vast landscapes were in opposition to my upbringing in the busy city of Bangkok. It was the first time I had the feeling of being misplaced, and the landscapes had an impact on me psychologically and geographically. Wenders' films reminded me of that very feeling again, though I may never understand or identify completely with his characters and filmic landscapes because of their associations with masculinity, which are too overpowering and dominant for me, in the same way that I do not feel comfortable watching Western genre films despite offering the same vast



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landscapes.

It was not long before I began my research that I discovered the films of Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang, which depict similar subjects to Wenders' films but brought them closer to home. He portrayed the city of Taipei and its people when there had been a radical change in the 1990s due to its economic success in Taiwan. Instead of the German and American landscapes in Wenders' films, Ming-Liang's landscapes are the city of Taipei, where the built-up environments dominate the characters whose desires are often unfulfilled. His films often depict such spaces as the vacant modern apartment amidst high-rise buildings that the three unrelated characters frequent (*Vive l'amour*, 1994), the family flat with a persisting leaking problem (*The River*, 1997), and the vacant lot of flats after the evacuation of residents due to an unknown virus (*The Hole*, 2000). Though his spaces often refer to the space of the family, many of them are no longer possessed of the same meaning as they are rather dysfunctional or, at worst, signify an absence from the space. The old meaning is in the process of deconstruction, as in Fran Martin's use of the term 'emptying out', and offers a new space where the meaning needs to be reconfigured, with the concept of homosexuality co-existing within the traditional space of the family and offering the possibility of new forms of relationship.¹

Ming-Liang's films were not an isolated phenomenon, considering the 1990s became a decade where many places around the world went through the process of remapping their social and physical terrain, with the increasing visibility of homosexuals which in a way was part of the globalisation

¹ Fran Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003. p. 167.





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process. There was also a group of films, queer Asian cinema, that projected similar ambiguous landscapes and made me question my own sexuality, both past and present. Having spent my primary education years in a convent school, my encounter with sexual ambiguity came at an early age as the most popular girls in school always had a tomboyish character. The effect on me may have come a bit later when I moved to a mixed-sex school where, at the age of twelve, I claimed one of the girls as my girlfriend. From then on, my sexuality became like a game for me, where I have found it liberating not having to submit to any category openly. In some way, homosexuality has been liberating in that one can directly resist the hegemony of a male-dominated society, and in queer Asian cinema they have also been a source of creativity. Ming-Liang's and other films in queer Asian cinema have become my motivation for wanting to know and discover these kinds of new spaces and their conditions that may provide a possibility for the construction of different identities to proliferate and offer an alternative living and thinking in today's rapidly changing society. No doubt these predispositions formed the starting point of my research.

Coming to space through filmic images, amidst the current interest in 'space' in different disciplines, from geography to gender studies, particularly in the 1990s, I realise that space has become a more significant tool and can be productive for me in terms of rethinking its relation to sexuality. Pioneer works such as Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* help me to think of space, not only its materiality but also the way in which it is conceptually produced and the significance of visual representation in the social production of space. Michel Foucault's *Of Other Spaces* enables me to search for 'heterotopia', spaces that are different from all the others, that "suspend, neutralise, or invert the set of relationships that they designate" in relation to homosexuality and how it functions





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in Thai society. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* makes possible a link between homosexuality and the concept of space and how the closet defines the structure of gay oppression; and in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, the notion of performativity emphasises the social construction of gender. Both have influenced the queer theory and its extension to geography and the so-called queer space. From the influence of such prominent works, together with the Thai conception of space and sexuality, I am aware of the importance of opening up a link between disciplines. Therefore it is my aim here to bring together a set of debates concerning the relationship between space and homosexuality in relation to visual representation, particularly filmic representation. I aim to employ different theories and methods in order to create a new paradigm of understanding, including artistic and non-artistic approaches, such as writing, photographing, mapping, video-making, curating, etc.





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RE-BOUNDARY BANGKOK

*If space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production. The 'object' of interest must be expected to shift from **things in space** to the actual **production of space**, but this formulation itself calls for much additional explanation.*

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), pp. 36-37

Departing from Ming-Liang's films, which centre on the city of Taipei, it seemed natural for my first venture to be to the city of Bangkok. First of all I wished to locate and bring to the fore what appeared to be under the visible layers of Bangkok. I set out to make a visual documentary on the life of homosexuals and how they construct their identity in the city of Bangkok. The documentary format is only a means I chose to work with. I did not intend only to make a record of homosexual life in Bangkok: it was a way for me to search for the origins of the subject of my fascination. Throughout the film, I also question my own identity and perhaps my own position in the culture, where public discussions regarding identity and sexuality, let alone homosexuality, have rarely been seen or heard. It is a way for me to pry into the invisible layers or into the private space of homosexuals which have never been represented before.

Through the life of four different characters – James, a German high-school instructor who commits his life to a partner; Ta, a student and part-time tour guide, whose life revolves around gay night life; Mount, a tomboyish tennis instructor; and Wee, an actor in a famous transvestite show – I was particularly interested in the way in which they construct identities in relation to urban landscapes and how the heterosexually dominated space of Bangkok has been appropriated by homosexual desires. It certainly directs my attention to the relationship between the alternative spaces that





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enable their desires and the already homosexually inscribed spaces like Patpong Soi 2, a famous gay night spot filled with bars and discotheques, and how both spaces play a significant role in the construction of homosexual identity. The documentary *Blue Journey* (1998, 45 mins.) had made sexuality visible through and in the urban landscapes which reveal certain tensions between the public and private space.

In an attempt to understand the conditions in which homosexuals found themselves, after my first visual research and my own private research on Asian queer cinema, I felt the need to lay the ground for my subject of inquiry and bring to the surface the subject of homosexuality in Thai society and further explore the subject of homosexuality in the public arena. Through the project *Alternative Love Film Festival*, which brings together queer cinema across the region and elsewhere for the screenings and the series of seminars regarding homosexual representations in the Thai media, I aim to provide an increasingly important issue concerning homosexuality but rarely allowed to be discussed in public, with the venue/a space to be discussed. Furthermore, I wanted to pose a kind of experimental project on public space in Bangkok: how the homosexual-related spaces are allowed to operate in the society. In hindsight, the project was of major significance to my overall thinking in the research.

My original intention was to keep the festival under an academic umbrella as I was not certain of the Thai audience's reaction to the first public screening of homosexually themed films. It was supposed to be held at Chulalongkorn University, with the support from the film department where I taught before taking a leave. However, it had to abruptly change as the project was facing discrimination





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within academic circles. Further, the Film Censorship Board, a government agency on which the head of department also had a seat, claimed the films were not appropriate for Thai audiences, deeming the films immoral and detrimental to the good nature of Thai culture. The event was forced to move from a university to a private location, a temporary theatre. The festival by then had become the centre of media attention and brought the homosexuality issue to a wider audience. Despite a threat from both organizations, the project managed to continue, with a legal threat hanging over it until the opening day, when police officers came in with a search warrant and tried to shut down the festival, as the films had been found unacceptable according to a report they had received from the Film Censorship Board. The local chief of police, in full uniform, attempted to disrupt the screening some five minutes into the film. When asked to address the full-house audience as to the reason for his interruption, he was immediately thrust to the forefront, and under the spotlight there was a momentary switching of roles between that of authority, the gaze, the surveillance, and the other that has often been the subject of the gaze and surveillance. The theatre had become a predominantly homosexual space in which heterosexuals had turned into a minority and the policeman's presence in the theatre needed to be justified. For me, this event foregrounded the significance of the unfixed relations between space and sexuality and how power relations work through space.

On the one hand, it had become a temporary space for coming out for many gays and lesbians who, by being at the festival, exposed themselves to the media. On the other, many homosexuals who did not feel comfortable exposing their identity to the public had the excuse of supporting an art and cultural event. This festival made visible the homosexual community outside their usual place in Patpong Soi 2. But it is still inappropriate to call it 'community' as the festival was structured out of





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the temporary of both time and space. However, the short-lived festival provided a temporary space for a safe 'coming out' and coming to terms with their homosexuality in a semi-public space. The festival brought to the surface conflicts that may not be visible in what seems to be a peaceful society. Nevertheless, it is always under constant monitoring by the watchful eyes of authority, who often tries to impose its power upon those who are considered "the other" in society, both physically and symbolically. Despite the false impression of Thailand, Bangkok in particular, being a gay paradise, visual representations relating to homosexuality are rarely seen in the public arena. The project has certainly set out the scope for my PhD project in the sense that space, in this case urban landscapes, homosexuality and visual representation are intricate and provide a further framework for my thesis.

After the festival, I returned to the more traditional method of research in order to understand and analyse the relationship between Thai homosexuals and urban space. First of all, I attempted to locate homosexuality within Thai society and culture through research on historical and cultural backgrounds, to demonstrate the way in which it may differ from the Western model of homosexuality. At the same time, in support of my written part, I also attempted to locate the homosexual space in Bangkok by way of researching through the historical and social background as well as mapping the gay venues in different periods, which led to my further argument on the changing pattern of the homosexual space in Bangkok. The mapping of gay venues was done over two periods, 1999 and 2003. This I called 'Topography of Desire', which showed the production of sexual space, that being exclusive in the red-light district in the past, had slowly expanded to other areas of Bangkok by 2003. To further demonstrate the point, I refer to the film *I am a Man* (M.L Bhandevanop





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Devakul, 1987), one of a few films relating to homosexuality in the 1980s, as a demonstration of the changes that took place between the 1980s to, for example, the one that was fuelled by the announcement, in 1996, of Rajabhat Teachers College's ban on gays and lesbians enrolling in courses leading to degrees in kindergarten and primary school teaching. This marked a significant change in the discourse on homosexuality in Thailand, as well as the changes marked by *Alternative Love Film Festival* and *Blue Journey*, in which the boundary between public/private, hetero/homo had to be redrawn in the wake of Thai lesbians and gay men beginning to problematise the silences surrounding homosexuality issues in the 1990s.

At the time, I had been thinking about a Thai term, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, which is a term people use to refer to "homosexual", as it suggests the uncertainty in identifying the sexual identity of that person. However, it is a usage that seems to put emphasis on my interest in homosexual space, as it also can be used to suggest the unsettling relationship between two things that could also be directly related to space with the term *pid* ("close") and *perd* ("open"). It can also further suggest a kind of in-between notion between public and private, whether a space, a condition, a metaphor that is beyond the reference to homosexuality. It is useful for me to rethink such terms in relation to Soja's 'thirdspace' or Foucault's 'heterotopia' in different conditions and frameworks. I aim to use the term in a way that one needs to repeatedly question its origin and the difference from the Western references, to suggest the always changing nature of such spaces, which cannot be fixed either in terms of its meaning or its locations. In this way, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is a tool of thinking and also a condition, a space or behaviour that is specifically Thai. The following exploration, both in writing and visual works in different spaces, may offer a better understanding of what *lak-ka-pid-*



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lak-ka-perd might be, in that each may evoke different aspects and different arrangements from the traditional space, whether home, body, and so on.





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RE-READING THE BODY

In order to add to the complexity of understanding a kind of in-between space in relation to homosexuality, I wanted to further suggest that the search for such spaces must be multiple and varied, and how they might relate to each other. For that reason, firstly, I move on to the space of the body as, according to Lefebvre, it is also a factor in the production of space, and in certain locations produces space through sexuality. Inspired by Parinya Kiatbutsaba's body, a transvestite or *katoey* boxer, I aimed to highlight the conceptualising of sexuality as performative, depending on time and space. For me, Parinya, who became famous for his make-up and hair band, and antics such as kissing his opponent at the end of each fight, has raised a lot of questions in terms of the degree to which the body of the individual subject could interrupt the dominant ideology, and blurring the boundary between public and private space.

I started the research on the discourse of the *katoey* body and how Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' enables me to rethink the *katoey*'s body in different way. I am also aided by Judith Butler's notion of performativity, which highlights issues of transgressive potential in the relations between bodies and particular places, to analyse how the presence of Parinya's body may have disrupted the highly masculine space of the boxing ring and clearly problematised the relationship between gendered body and space. His body of in-between masculinity and femininity may well explain my use of the term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* in a more physical form.

I was so overwhelmed by the atmosphere of a boxing match when I filmed one of the fights by Parinya, that I started to take an interest in how Parinya's body has turned into a the spectacular





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'other' body that is both forbidden and desired. I attempted to portray such a process in *Kinnaree* (1998), a name taken from a Thai fairytale character whose body of half-bird, half-human was an object of desire by human. It is a kind of body that once forbidden from the stage during the dictatorship era. What interested me in this work is the way in which the body can transform the space and how it emphasises the importance of the 'gaze' in transforming the heterosexual space into a space of homoerotic desire. It also helps to extend the notion of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* in the sense that the act of looking, of gazing, can make possible what seem to be in opposite poles to take place simultaneously.





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RE-IMAGINED 'HOME'

Home has been one of the most important spaces in the construction of dominant ideology. It is also one of the spaces that has been changed dramatically in the last few years. The boundary that was once clearly drawn between public and private has been transgressed and destabilised through physical mobility, new communication technologies, as well as the transformation of sexual cultures. The conditions under which the public and private reluctantly co-exist, bringing one into another and vice versa, have given a new dimension to the notion of 'home'. It is a space that demands further attention, in terms of how it might need to be re-imagined in different ways and redrawing the boundary once again in relation to the presence of the body of homosexuals. This is exactly what the series of works which I will discuss below attempt to explore.

The first one is *Home Movie* (video, 2002), which investigates the traditional space of family, when homosexual desire is negotiated and perhaps reluctantly allowed to co-exist within the space of the family. For me, the concept of home movies is often associated with heterosexual ideology, the representation of family, a happy home. However, in this video piece the common images of the mother cooking in the kitchen, the father washing the car, the grandparents looking after the grandchildren, are no longer represented. By using what is considered to be personal footage and a kind of home movie that records everyday life as well as fictional footage from past memories, I replace common images of the bedroom and living room in the home with isolated, depressed, distanced images and fuse those images of supposed fact with fiction. It is when dark has become light and the private has become public that the unexpected – the "obscenity", homosexuality – is presented to us. Through the work, it is quite clear that the traditional space of home has been





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transformed into the frontier of the unknown.

In an attempt to extend the notion of 'home' beyond the boundary of the nation, and redefine its meaning in relation to homosexuality, the term "leave to remain" has struck me as a condition of my presence, both emotional and physical, in England, as well as that of many others in contemporary society where displacement has become a common symptom. It is a term that may well explain the condition of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* in another dimension which I intended to use as a departure point to explore further and address several questions in the complex and ever-changing condition of the relationship between diaspora or the "Other" and the Western in the blurring phase of the borderlines in the world today. During my past few years in England, I came across many friends who have to live in England, legally or illegally, for different reasons. Many of them have chosen to live outside Thailand because of their homosexuality, and my encounter with them has redefined my notion of 'home' and the way in which desire has propelled people to create alternative spaces of desire beyond the traditional space of family that we used to know.

The first work in the theme 'leave to remain' is a series of photographic images, *Feel It Like Home* (2003-2004), in which I want to draw attention to the current state of post-9/11 paranoia and 'fear' and the continuing controversial issues of asylum seekers in Europe, particularly in Britain, both in the physical space and in the state of mind of the people who occupy the space that once again redefines what 'home' is. Its traditional notion has also gradually been redefined and is in question by the restructuring of gender and sexuality through the feminist and queer movement in the last few decades. The secured door and window of the happy family home have reluctantly been forced





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to open to uninvited guests. By choosing to work with the photographic images, in the moments of stillness I captured the individual that was caught in the void, which provokes the inability to feel the sense of belonging. The corridor, the window frame, the door-frame, the stairwell produce a sense of in-between where public/private, outside/inside boundaries no longer fulfil their usual function but provide a splintering boundary where fantasy and desire can fuse with reality, in which is created a surreal feeling imposed on the notion of 'home'.

The second work is *Are You Local?* (video, 2004). During the course of interviews with many friends for whom homosexuality was their main reason to relocate, I met Tip, a homosexual whose meaning of 'home' may differ from that of many, as she reconstructs her new identity as a British wife in a 'home' in a suburb of London where she lives with her husband. The objective of this work was very much like that of my first work, *Blue Journey* (1998), but in a different context. As an actor, Tip prefers to 'perform' in order to give a truer version of her feelings. For Tip, with her new constructed identity, to perform is more real than to be natural. The exotic Other and the British notion of 'home' perhaps do not belong together in reality. I wanted to revisit the documentary form in a way to question the construction of the subject's identity portrayed in the film and experiment with ways of representing the new identity. It also aims to question the boundaries of the local and the global, the traditional home and the present home that often cross over and mix in the construction of homosexual identity.





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RE-FRAMING CINEMATIC SPACE

After several years of exploring this theme, I would like to go back to the origin of my quest, where the concept of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is substantially produced through filmic space. I wanted to focus on the films that came to my attention when I first started, as well as the recent ones, *Vive l'amour* (Tsai Ming Liang, 1994), *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar Wai, 2002), and *Tropical Malady* (Apichartpong Weerasethkul, 2004). By coming back to them again, I could see more clearly the complex relations between sexuality, space and representation. I am also assisted by Laura Mulvey's exploration of cinematic spaces and power relations. The cinema space, according to Mulvey, can be generated and extended into metaphor as well as embodied in the wider ideological ideas of cultural tradition and signification.² These emblematic spaces are often filled with signification beyond its story and characters. They invite the spectator to read the cinema space in a way Gaston Bachelard terms a 'topoanalysis', or in the language of film criticism, to read the *mise-en-scène*.³

2 Laura Mulvey, 'Cinematic Space: 'Desiring and Deciphering' in *Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary* (eds. Duncan McCorquodale, Katerina Ruedi and Sarah Wigglesworth), London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 1996, pp. 208-215.

3 *ibid.* p. 209.





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TESTING OUT IDEAS AND SETTING OUT FOR ANOTHER DEPARTURE

My aim for the thesis project has been to ruminate on the possibility of the alternative arrangement of space in relation to homosexuality. There has been a search for an alternative kind of space and an attempt to understand its structure and the power relations inscribed on to it. Through the research I have formulated what I term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* as a condition and a kind of space where I hope to offer a different mode of thinking in different disciplines. My move to Malmö Art Academy in 2003 from Goldsmiths College, University of London, has made it possible for me to better define the way I approach the subject matter and further allow me to explore it from different angles, particularly through art practices that generate different kinds of knowledge. It has also enabled me to test out the idea of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* and open up to more possibilities of discovering the invisible layers of Bangkok. "*Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: the Bangkok Invisible Landscapes Project*" (2005) was created in collaboration with Miya Yoshida. It comprises art exhibitions, film competitions, and seminars concentrating on the way in which the space and its relationship to the city's inhabitants has been re-imagined in the new invisible landscapes of Bangkok through the changes in perception towards sexuality due to the increasing visibility of homosexual and other social and technological transformations. It is an open platform that allows artists, filmmakers and academics to address and question the term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, a condition that could happen in other places and different areas of interest, from the viewpoint-both of the local and the other or outsider.

Moreover, the film programme aims to explore the relationships between city-filmic images and the link to the lived experiences of the inhabitants. The dynamic programme is comprised of three different groups of films. The first is a group of acclaimed short films on Bangkok that have been



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made in recent years. The second is a selection of short films from a short film competition, 'A Day in (The Other) Bangkok', which asked the participants to capture the transformations of Bangkok from diverse views. The third is newly made short films on Bangkok. It is an adventurous commission between the project and three young filmmakers to produce short films about their own invisible or *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* Bangkok.

The Bangkok that we know and experience and what has been represented elsewhere ("city of vice") may represent different cities. What is the real Bangkok may never be represented in one single entity in any one of the representations, whether in film or in any art piece, or cannot be articulated in any perfect description in a written version. Perhaps it is between these different approaches that one can find the real Bangkok, or perhaps an alternative Bangkok, if one really exists.

Through contributions by artists, filmmakers and academics, the project has opened up more possibilities of thinking and researching, which have become a platform for juxtaposing different ideas, different approaches, different elements, where I hope to further suggest the creativity that derives from questioning the binary opposition, whether hetero/homo, public/private, self/other, etc, triggered by the term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, which in the end produced a kind of an in-between space, a third space itself.

For the final part of the project, the exhibition at Lund Konsthall in September 2006, I aim to juxtapose different forms of representation and different research approaches and materials that I have employed throughout my research in order to reveal the complex nature of contemporary





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urban conditions and to create the experience of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* that cannot be reduced to any single form or approach. It is also a kind of test site, to put into different contexts the question of the relationship of sexuality to space. It is always in the state of 'becoming' an art-research that needs to be looked at with greater openness.





LAK - KA - PID - LAK - KA - PERD

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What is Lak - Ka - Pid - Lak - Ka - Perd?

WHAT IS LAK-KA-PID-LAK-KA-PERD?

In the third world, the displacement of postmodernism is not simply a matter of criticizing modernism as theory, philosophy, or ideas of cognition; rather, it is the emergence of an entirely different problematic, a displacement of a displacement that is in excess of what is still presented as the binarism of modernism-postmodernism.

(Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, p.57)

In an attempt to understand and conceptualise the idea of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, firstly I would like to draw upon poststructuralist theories, which always suspect the logocentric nature in the history of Western philosophy. Such theorists as Jacques Derrida⁴ and Gayatri Spivak⁵ attempt to expose the 'privilege' term in binary opposition and how its identity depends upon the exclusion of the subordinate or the other. Derrida, in particular, suggests further that it is not only to recognise the metaphorical power of the binary opposition in text, but within the deconstruction process it also involves the breaking down of the binaries in an attempt to "pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier, to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed".⁶ It is also necessary to constantly seek out terms that disturb the logic of the text under examination in order to reveal the inadequate logical and rational structure of the text, not only through the understanding of the deconstruction process, but one also needs to draw across disciplines from geography to queer theory, from performativity to psychoanalytical

4 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), *Dissemination* (London, Athlone Press, 1972).

5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.lxxv.





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theory, to the way in which it could be conceptualised and operationalised outside Western disciplines in order to understand the term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, as I shall illustrate further.

In ideological terms, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* can be considered part of ancient Thai ideology regarding space. According to Nithi Awesriwong, space can be understood in two dimensions, horizontal and vertical.⁷ Vertically, the space is believed to separate into a hierarchy of different levels of respect, ranging from human to human, human to spirit, and all things in general, including our bodies, are to be categorised into these different levels.⁸ For instance, monks are considered to be on a higher level than a normal person, and that we should treat them and all things associated with them with respect. Horizontally, the spaces have been divided into two different areas according to the hierarchy of respectability as well sacredness.⁹ It can be separated by a physical boundary, such as a temple or royal palace, and by abstraction where there is no clear (such as to use a thread to separate the space) or in some cases invisible boundary. For example, the Thai belief that common people should not sit at the same level of space as monks; therefore, in the case of monks having to sit at the same level on the ground, Thai people tend to make a separation by using mats for the monks to put them in a higher position. The mat area for the monks can be considered a sacred space that separates them from the rest, which common people may not enter, or they have to dress or behave in a certain way. The sacred space can also be abstractly separated by a thread which monks or spiritualists use to divide the ceremonial space from the rest which others are not allowed

7 Nithi Aewsriwong, *Pah-kao-ma, Pah-sin, Underwear and Etc.: Culture, Transformation and Others* (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995), p. 139.

8 *ibid.*, p. 139.

9 *ibid.*, p. 139.





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to enter as they are not given the same level of respect. However, this boundary is easy to undo: if you only wrap up that mat, all of a sudden the divided spaces become one again.

Although Thai spaces are very much divided, whether with or without physical boundaries, into different spaces with their own rules, depending on their type of sacredness, and they are quite fragmented, they are fluid and unfixed. It is possible for a person to change or to move from one space to another, though it may be quite difficult to change vertically. One can change horizontally, but one needs to change oneself according to the rules of each space. According to Nithi Aewsriwong, there are four ways to change oneself, including appearance, behaviour, by going through rituals, and by superpower, which is often the case in Thai folklore and beliefs.¹⁰ It is why we may change our clothes or appearance according to space rather than time. This belief has led to the importance of appearance rather than the essence or identity of a person that underlies the way in which *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is to be understood. It is this kind of abstraction in the understanding of space that allows multiple-activities to take place simultaneously in one single space.

A similar kind of ideology can also be found elsewhere, as is suggested in the discussion of Rabelais' works by Mikhail Bakhtin regarding the carnival and grotesque bodies in the time of Rabelais and until the eighteenth century, where high and low culture can be simultaneously represented, possibly breaking down the distinction between the two.¹¹ Strange and familiar elements were allowed to exist within the same space and time of the carnivalesque, where "the principle of the world [is]

10 ibid., p. 146.

11 Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Helene Iswolsky). Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1984. p. 13.





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turned upside down, where everything becomes its opposite.”■

As a part of speech, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is now a specific kind of figurative slang that is often used in a sexualised context, a metaphor – an attempt to use one meaning system to explain another (to make an unfamiliar subject a familiar one). Though it is officially known as a kind of medical symptom relating to tooth and gum disorders, it is increasingly now used to refer to a homosexual or someone who occasionally displays behaviours of the opposite sex. It is perhaps derived from the term *lak-ka-phet* (*phet* meaning sex/sexuality), which refers directly to persons who display themselves differently from what is expected from the sex they were born into, but in more ways than one *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* conveys a rather ambiguous meaning that could be used in broader terms, such as to convey the meaning of something that could not be decided one way or another. Through its literary linguistic meaning of sometimes close-sometimes open, the term suggests a kind of specific spatial arrangement as well as a specific kind of temporal arrangement, an element that time and time again will come to play a significant part in the understanding of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*.

However, in this thesis I want to consider *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* in a more spatial mode, both as spatial metaphor, a way of talking about power that is made possible by radical geography (Massey 1993, Keith and Pile 1993, Smith and Katz 1993, Brown 2000) and a text of Eve K. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, as well as in a mode of geographical materiality that could be taking various forms and different scales such as the body, a home, a city, or a country where spatial and

12 See Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London: Routledge, 1997, p. 33) for further discussion on the carnivalesque and the market place in constituting a kind of heterotopic space.





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cultural orders are embedded and reproduced as Pierre Bourdieu may use the term 'habitus' to describe.¹³ These spaces then can be seen as the embodiment of knowledge that must be recognised in terms of Foucault's (1980) power/knowledge regime and very much the same way the term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* itself already embodies. It suggests and exercises a similar spatial structure and arrangement as the term 'closet' has.¹⁴ They both imply the attempt to conceal and the attempt to display at different times, or in other words, things are not fully concealed and are not fully visible. It signifies the similar kind of oppressive structure for homosexuals that has been suggested by the term 'closet' in queer study as pioneered by Sedgwick. Although it might not be quite the same to the term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* when 'lak' is put in front of 'pid' (close) and 'perd' (open), they signify the act of sometimes close and sometimes open. Therefore the attempt to 'conceal' and 'display' are not straight forward.

Instead of concentrating on the oppositional space of the inside and outside of the closet, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* attempts to find the in-between space where things can be simultaneously represented,

13 By using the term 'habitus', we understand these spaces in terms of a set of structured rules and beliefs that have been naturalised through a form of 'habit' and of 'habitat'. See Pierre Bourdieu, 'Structures, Habitus, Practices' in *The Logic of Practice* (trans. Richard Nice), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p. 210.

14 Michael P. Brown's *Closet Space: Geographies of metaphor from the body to the globe* discusses exclusively the notion of the 'closet' and its relation to power/knowledge, in which he links the power with homophobia or heteronormativity. However, it is important to note that it is not so long ago that "Thai culture" has really used the closet in the same way as the West. "Thai culture" had used the kind of case or box to keep clothes and other valuable belongings in, which was easy to carry and move around, just before the Western influence in the period of King Rama V (1868-1910). The different history and context of the closet may result in a different connotation of the term for Thai people and perhaps elsewhere. The term itself has never been used directly in metaphor, but in Thai other terms in relations to a homosexual, such as *E-ape* ("the one who hides"), could suggest the same kind of spatial arrangement as the term 'closet' suggests. (Various Thai terms will be analysed elsewhere in the thesis.)





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similar to Henry Urbach's 'ante-closet', which is the space before the closet that one uses to dress and undress oneself and position oneself in-between spaces, that is- neither in the room nor in the closet, which he links to what Deleuze terms *pli* in his attempt to explain a space that emerges both within and against social relations, to constitute a space of self-representation at once connected and free from social norms.■

The ante-closet is not a permanent or fixed space as it would appear and disappear dependent on one's needs or desires to change oneself. It is a space where one's concerns of self-representation in the social world intervene with one's fantasy.

(Henry Urbach's "Closets, Clothes, disClosure", p. 349)

It is a space that no longer belongs to any conventional thinking or, in other words, any binary opposition that governs the society. It is a space that is both metaphoric and material. In general, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* can be compared to the kind of spaces that have been described and materialised by Michel Foucault's 'Other Space' or 'heterotopia' (1986), Edward Soja's 'Third Space' (1996), and Henry Lefebvre's 'Counter Space' (1991). It is a space that could be considered both real and imagined, which can set out and initiate a new kind of mapping, where all the traditional relationships between spaces have been rearranged beyond our geographical imagination. For me, it is also a space that could be found in everyday life, where its very meaning could be resisted and changed from within and grants people an opportunity to think of their own conditions in relation to the set of norms that have been inscribed onto the spaces that have long governed their very being. Spaces such as cinema, park, shopping mall, sport stadium, theme park, home to a very personal

15 Henry Urbach's "Closets, Clothes, disClosure" in *Gender, Space, Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (eds. Jane Rendall, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden. London: Routledge. 2000. p. 349.



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space of the body, are no longer easy to grasp as they are always slippery and incomplete.

Beyond the above suggestion of its close relation to the 'closet', *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* also links directly to the notion of 'performativity' that has been influentially theorised by Judith Butler. For Butler, there is no longer the fixed and given role of gender that produced oneself or identity, but gender identity as the 'disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy', which has been produced through a series of acts, gestures and desire that presents onto the body's surface.¹⁶ At the same time, these performative acts also sexualize space. The space that used to be naturalised now "can thus be dressed in any way: any sexual identity can assume space and space can assume any sexual identity".¹⁷ The space then can become unfixed and operate as a kind of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* when constructed by the very acts of performativity. When the sexuality conceptualised as performative, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* can also be seen as a strategy that helps one to arrange oneself in the complex society.

However, it is 'performativity' according to the context, or *kalatesa*, knowing how one should appear and behave in the particular intersection of places, time and relationship that best explain *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* as a strategy, because of the Thai people's sensitivity to context that allows the surfaces to be changeable and makes possible the flowing of multiple gender/sexual identities. The gender/sexual surfaces can be perceived as temporal and non-fixed, which can be transformed in order for one to have an appropriate and smooth contact with others. The surface that can be seen as 'an embodied social practice that is not based on a notion of expressing an interior', individualised self

16 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge: London, 1990, pp. 135-136.

17 David Bell and Gill Valentine. *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*. Routledge: London. 1995. p. 18.





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which is in contrast to Western 'faciality' which, drawing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, detaches faces from bodies in order to construct a symbolic, essentialised self-identity.■

According to Deleuze and Guattari, 'faciality' can be seen as a regime of signs relying on the production of two semiotic systems, public representation (the white wall) and private self-consciousness (the black hole), which itself functions as a dynamic point of contact where the two systems are communicated both with each other and with world at large. However, for the Thai 'face', instead of the dynamic communication between the two, the private 'self' is kept hidden inside the black hole and allowed only the public representation or the 'face' to communicate with the multiplicity of forces that operate within the society. The Thai 'face' or Thai performativity acts is then disconnected from what the West knows as 'self' and instead it is transformable and transitory depending on time, locations and relationships with persons, or *kalatesa*. The Thai 'face', then, can be multiplied and signified by the battle of both public/private and self/other. The Thai 'face' in this case is, in Derridean thinking, not the part and yet not the whole in the unitary structure.

But how can a certain act being used to transform a whole space? Can it be used as strategy or a process for a minoritarian subject to unsettle the hegemonic ideology? How can the understanding of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* and the operation of the 'face' be used to construct and understand the space and geography beyond the hegemonic Western knowledge? These are questions that I shall explore further into different locations and scales of space in the thesis.

18 Brian P. McGrath, "Bangkok Simultopia", in *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis* (eds. Amy Binzaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach). London: Routledge. 2002. p. 208.



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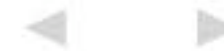
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Furthermore, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is not only a means or a tool for exploring in this thesis, but points to the way in which the thesis itself is organised, as the term also signifies a process in which each fragmented and contradictory space can be experienced in a non-linear way. The juxtaposing of two different elements of, metaphorically, opening and closing, resulting in something in-between, something unknown, has forced us to understand them from a different perspective in relation to the production of knowledge. It allows for a more subconscious experience, as it tends to concentrate on the slippages in meaning (Lacan, 1977). It resembles the 'montage' method pioneered by Sergei Eisenstein. It is an idea that "arises from the collision of independent shots-shots even opposite to one another"¹⁹ where the splicing and stitching of each shot always creates conflicts, such as when the elements of closeness and openness are placed side by side. It is a method based on the principle of conflicts (conflicts between shots, within a shot, etc.).²⁰ Each one plus continues to subtract, add, erase, reconstruct, and deconstruct the previous one, without end. The result can never be premeditated and more often than not negates the previous meaning. Neither can it be singular, as each conflict offers a multiplicity of choices, resulting in a never-ending process where each organically grows out of the other. Rather than being juxtaposed, they pile up one on top of the other as we see the continuously moving images creating the montage. While the old meaning or old image may be deconstructed as the new one emerges, the old one still remains and produces a rather different and unimagined meaning. It is in this moment of blurring that *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* may take a different direction from the 'montage'. Instead of a clear message deriving from

19 Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (ed. and trans. Jay Leyda), Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1949, p. 49.

20 *ibid.* p. 38-39.





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the juxtapositions of the montage, the result of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is rather ambiguous and can never be predicted.

It is also not structured out of 'building-blocks' or the 'unrolling' of an idea, as Eisenstein suggests, but is rather unstructured and unruly, like building bricks on the moon or in zero-gravity conditions which can go into different directions. It may resemble the 'rhizome' structure described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, that also connects directly to surveying and mapping of a kind where "the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification."²¹ All in all, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* is a spatial metaphor, a material geography, a kind of mapping (of desire, of location, of relationship, etc.), a strategy, a process that one has to continue to explore to unsettle-and open up new possibilities, a new term for the postmodern landscape in Thailand and elsewhere. It is not one way or another but perhaps all in one.

21 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum. 1987. pp. 3-29.





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Re-Boundary Bangkok

THE CITY

RE-BOUNDARY BANGKOK

Cities and Sexualities both shape and are shaped by the dynamics of human social life. They reflect the ways in which social life is organized, the ways in which it is represented, perceived and understood, and the ways in which various groups cope with and react to these conditions.

Lawrence Knopp, *Sexuality and Urban Space in Mapping Desire*, p.10

We understood and thought that the world was ours, especially gays. We cannot think like that because the world is not ours anymore. We came to the wrong world. At the wrong place? There might be a planet for gay people where I would be happy. You could date anyone you wish.

Mao, one of the characters in the documentary, quoted from an interview in *Blue Journey* (documentary, 1998)

There is a double notion when discussing the representation of the city of Bangkok: Bangkok as it is imagined in film or in other media, and-Bangkok as a site of Thai social and economic life which people actually experience. It is the relationship between the two, particularly the representation of Bangkok through filmic representation, and the actual events taking place in Bangkok, that is important to the understanding of homosexuality in Thailand.

The representation of Bangkok has long been associated with sexual activities, particularly in relation to images of exotic Thai women. Prior to the 1990s, it would have been unthinkable to imagine Bangkok as a paradise for gays and lesbians. However, today it would be rather difficult to deny the image of Bangkok as having the largest and most visible gay subculture in Southeast Asia.



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Re-Boundary Bangkok

The Bangkok street that once symbolised heterosexual hegemony is being challenged by images of homosexuality, such as the first Gay Festival in 1999. Homosexuality, long relegated to the dark corners of Bangkok, now attempts to reclaim the public and open space enjoyed by hegemonic heterosexuality. Since the 1990s, the city has gone through rapid changes, both in terms of its representation and its social and economic space in relation to homosexuality.

Nevertheless, it is still difficult to locate homosexuals in the city of Bangkok beyond the red-light district of Patpong, Silom Soi 2 in particular. Through my initial research on how homosexuals construct their identity, I have made the documentary *Blue Journey* (1998) in an attempt to bring to the fore what seems to be the invisible layer of Bangkok. Being away from Bangkok, and looking back from London, I felt an urge to look to Bangkok in different ways and explore its new face in relation to homosexuality. *Blue Journey* was a starting point for me in terms of understanding the way in which homosexuals construct their identity and their space within the city of Bangkok, and provided my analysis with more profound insights the space of Bangkok in relation to homosexuality and how their desires are produced within the space of the city.

This chapter, then, considers the way in which the representation of Bangkok has changed in relation to the emergence of homosexuality. I am particularly interested in the way in which homosexuality has been constructed through the organisation of space – public/private (open/close or *perd/pid*). However, *perd* and *pid* are not exactly equivalent in meaning to the English “public and private” as discussed in *What is lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, and I think it is important to bear in mind the slight difference from the West in the construction of the homosexual identity in Thai society before I go





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further into the discussion on the notions of public and private. Though in both cases the terms *perd* and *pid* in Thai and "public" and "private" in English imply the relationship between space and body, or society and individual, the terms *perd* and *pid* put more emphasis on the body to make 'open' and 'closed' conditions. They have become one of the most powerful control mechanisms in existence to ensure that heterosexual ideology remains privileged in Thai society. It is the relationship between the public and private space, both in terms of geography and metaphor, that has shaped the Thai understanding of homosexuality. By using the terms 'public' and 'private', I also want to suggest that Thai homosexual discourse has long been constructed around these terms in a way that is specifically different from the West.

My argument is that there has been a change in the representation of Bangkok in relation to homosexuality from the late 1980s through the 1990s and up until the present. There has been some kind of move from homosexuality being kept in the 'private' realm and separated from the 'public' space of Bangkok towards one in which homosexuality seems to emerge into the 'public' space of Bangkok and blur the boundary between the space of the public and the private, or what I call *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*. What are the specific conditions and arrangements? And how do homosexuals construct their identity in these changing spatial conditions? Moreover, have there been any changes in the hegemonic ideology from the 1980s through to the 1990s resulting from the changes in the representation of Bangkok?

In an attempt to respond to the above questions, in the following sections-I would like to discuss, firstly, how homosexuality has been placed in the Thai context and within the space of Bangkok,





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and how the terms 'public' and 'private' have been used to construct the knowledge of the Thai homosexual, later demonstrated through filmic representation: *I am a Man* (1987). The film *I am a Man* probably best describes how homosexuals have been understood and how they have functioned in Thai society, particularly in the 1980s. It is also one of a few films dealing directly with gay themes and characters in the Thai film industry, and was also a very popular film with the Thai audience at a time when homosexuality was still a taboo subject, not openly discussed in society. I will then look at my documentary *Blue Journey* in an attempt to demonstrate a changing relationship between public and private space in relation to the homosexual construction of identity, as well as the changing space of Bangkok in which also the mapping of Bangkok gay nightspots in two periods, 1999 and 2003, signals alternative sites for homosexuals beyond the red-light district, as seen in the supporting material *Topography of Desire*. Various gay clubs, pubs, cafés and restaurants, including a few lesbian places, have been opened in various sites around Bangkok, and many traditional spaces such as on Sanamchai Road, situated in the heart of the old city, near the Grand Palace and many government buildings such as the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Army Camp, have turned into a cruising area where young men offer themselves as a commodity. These alternative sites have prompted a new understanding of traditional spaces and the part they play in the transformation of Bangkok landscapes in relation to homosexuality.

I then examine the emerging subject of homosexuality in public discourse, almost a decade later, in the public debates and demonstrations for and against the ban on gays and lesbians entering the Rajabhat Teachers College, and the test site which I organised in 1998, *Alternative Love Film Festival*, that opened up several possibilities in terms of the relationship between visual representation, space





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and homosexuality, which has become a ground for my overall research and practical works.





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LOCATING THAI HOMOSEXUALITY: PID/PERD ("CLOSE/OPEN")

It is rather difficult to discuss the subject of Thai gays and lesbians without referring to the terms which often point to the significance of spaces between public and private. The binary terms – for instance, *Lub* ("private")/*Jang* ("public"), *Nai* ("inside")/*Noke* ("outside"), *Pid* ("close")/*Perd* ("open") – are always used to construct the discourse on homosexuality and to describe the characteristics, activities, or to form part of the words that are used to label homosexuals.■ As well as gender in general, this has also been bound up with the organisation of space, which is overdetermined by the binary opposition of space. The associations of "interior", "private", "inside", or "enclosed" space with femininity, and "exterior", "public", or "outside" space with masculinity have existed throughout history. There is a certain boundary between these two spaces that cannot be crossed. Through a number of strategies, Thai society has established itself as a masculine society and repressed the other sex, whether through religion (Buddhism), state policies, traditions, etc. For more than 700 years, Thai society has been ruled by a system called *poh-pok-krong-luke* ("father governs children"), deeply rooted through an absolute monarchy, and the same sense of being governed by male authority, which still carries over to the present time and penetrates into every aspect of Thai life, such as the man always being head of the family. On the other hand, the idea of Buddhism, whether or not it is the real intention, is also an important ideology that has created a long belief in the superiority of masculinity. For instance, only Thai men are permitted to perform the greatest act in Buddhism, which is to become a monk.

Nevertheless, the terms "public" and "private" may lead to an understanding which is different from

22 However, the meaning of these terms do not exactly match any English words because in one word only contains different meanings in English while ever meanings still remain sense of spaces. For instance, the word *lub* could also mean secret, hidden places.





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the one in Western countries, and which I believe will offer a different discourse on homosexuality and gender as a whole. It is undeniable that the understanding of space in Thai society today has been influenced by Western knowledge, but the Thai ideology of space still permeates our thinking to this day. As I have argued in the previous section, according to Thai spatial ideology there is no clear boundary between each space. However, spaces are quite fragmented and separated from each other, both horizontally and vertically. The public and private spheres are not quite separated through architecture or distinct physical partitions, as in some cases, in a traditional Thai house the private space equivalent to a bedroom in Western countries may only be separated from other rooms by mosquito nets. Private acts such as sexual activity may only be a few steps away from other members of the family. The pile of clothes in a corner of the room, rather than a closet, may also signify a private area. While the boundaries may not be clear, there are, however, clear rules on how one should behave in each space, and if a rule is violated or an attempt is made to cross the boundary between spaces without changing oneself according to the rules, the consequence could be punishment by society or the sacred spirits who Thais believe govern the spaces (different spaces are governed by different spirits).²³

While in the West, particularly throughout European history, the boundaries of urban space were clearly drawn and heterogeneous mixing was seen as potentially leading to pollution, destabilisation and disorder by Victorian reformers, up until that time the urban space lacked a form of physical segregation.²⁴ The separate spheres of public and private, home and work, and feminine and

23 Anan Kanchanapand, *Theory and Methodology of Cultural Research*, Bangkok: Amarin Printing, 2005, p. 131.

24 David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 22.





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masculine that were allocated to different parts of the house were enforced by the reformers.²⁵ Moreover, in the industrial context in the nineteenth century, many Western cities were designed to meet the needs of a gender-based division of labour, which has further divided the public and private spheres of existence.²⁶ I would argue that in Thailand, with its strongly grounded agricultural society, the physical segregation was less significant. One of the reasons may well be that all the villagers know each other; there is no need for a physical boundary to separate public and private spheres. Architecturally, there is not much of a physical boundary between public and private spheres; windows and doors may not function as dividers between the two spaces, and may not even exist at all in some houses, particularly in rural areas. The private sphere of home, then, is often visible from outside. Married women with bare torsos could be seen from outside, and at times even outside their homes, as evidenced in many photographs taken by missionaries during the period of King Rama V (1853-1910).²⁷

Moreover, Thai architecture provides many in-between spaces, such as a kind of terrace, to link the outside and the inside. However, while the term 'terrace' in the West may refer to a space that provides the view of the outside, in Thai 'terrace' is a space that connects different functions within the house. Instead of separating each function through partitions, with a different functions in each room, the Thai 'terrace' offers a space for multiple functions such as eating, sleeping, cooking,

25 *ibid.*, p. 22.

26 Lawrence Knopp, *Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis in Mapping Desire* (eds. David Bell & Gill Valentine), London: Routledge, 1995, p. 154.

27 Nithi Aewsriwong, Pah-kao-ma, Pah-sin, *Underwear and Etc.: Culture, Transformation and Others*, Bangkok: Matichon, 1995. p. 197.





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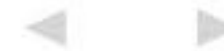
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working in the same space. In some way, the 'terrace' is both a public and a private space.

Not until the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910-1925) was the boundary between the two spheres quite clearly drawn. Thamora Fishel (1999) points out that "Siam brought with it bourgeois patterns of sex-segregated work, while at the same time introducing an ideology that women and men should mix socially." This has also led to the shifting relationship between men and women, following the Western model. The binary opposition between man/woman, masculine/feminine was officially enforced as a relationship model in Rama VI's reign, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. It still functions to ensure the dominance of heterosexual ideology, as seen in the attempt to assign roles to gays and lesbians: for instance, male homosexuals as gay-queen and gay-king, lesbians as *tom* and *dee*, roughly corresponding to the Western terms 'butch' and 'femme', which some of the new generation of homosexuals are eager to resist, a tendency that is very much a subject of discussion in this thesis.

As I mentioned earlier, despite the influence of the West, Thai ideology in relation to space still prevails in the society, particularly the way in which space is quite fragmented and there are no clear boundaries between them, as can still be seen in Thai mural paintings to this day. The different spaces, such as those of a royal palace, a village, a forest, can be presented in one painting with multiple narratives taking place simultaneously, which can be read in various ways. Although the way in which the architecture of buildings dominating the urban landscapes has increasingly divided public/private, work/home, outside/inside, the separation is more symbolic as the boundary is still fluid and more fragmented. Moreover, it can also be seen through the Thai use of the term





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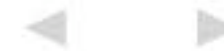
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kalatesa (*kala* – time, *tesa* – space), a temporal and spatial order that has been used as a form of social control. One has to behave according to the unwritten rules of space as well as time. There is no adequate translation for the term *kalatesa*; 'appropriate' has been suggested, but it does not incorporate the dimensions of time and space in the way the Thai term does. One has to act and appear according to certain rules in order to maintain social order. In other words, space and time have become a social mechanism to ensure the appropriateness of activities, behaviour, appearance and, very often, playing the right gender role in the right space and time. They often suggest and predetermine what kind of activities should or should not be undertaken and who should be involved. For example, Thais believe that sexual activity should only be performed inside the house and should never be discussed in public.

Through *kalatesa*, the Thai social code of conduct is already predetermined by time and space. The right gender behaviours also have to be performed despite their sexuality. Gender and appearance are very much transferable and unfixed. One can be homosexual without any interference from society if one can present the right image at the right place and time. Being homosexual in Thai society can harm one's public image, which is taken seriously in Thai society as Thai people are much more concerned with how they appear to others and meeting others' expectations than concerned about who they really are. A man or woman will suffer embarrassment and damage to his/her reputation if homosexual behaviour finds its way into the public sphere or in an inappropriate *kalatesa*.

While there is no rigid boundary between spaces, *kalatesa* has created a particular condition which I call *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, which may best be described by the behaviours of homosexuals as their





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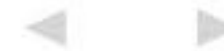
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identity becomes unfixed through the changeable nature of behaviours and appearances through *kalatesa*, which at the same time can be seen as a mechanism to control homosexuality as well as a liberating practice in a society where the 'face' can be multiple and different from the 'self', as I suggested in the previous section. This rather in-between condition, always in the process of changing, may also be confirmed through the use of several terms, including *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* and *krung-bok-krung-nam* (literally "half ground-half water") which demonstrate the unsettling process of having to arrange themselves on a particular side of the binary and the ability to move from one pole to another to create something rather different from the original positions in the binary.

Moreover, terms such as *e-ape* ("Miss hidden"), *ape-jit* ("hidden mind") and *sawang-jit* ("lightening mind") can compare to the closure of "the closet" and "coming out" used in Western homosexual discourses, as Henry Urbach suggests to refer to gay identity being concealed and disclosed.²⁸ These terms demonstrate the importance of dialectics between being in the dark/hiding space and the light/public space in the contemporary construction of Thai homosexual discourse. Although the notion of 'coming out' depends on the binary opposition of public and private space, between known and unknown, its meaning is different in Thai contexts, where sexuality itself is deemed inappropriate for public discussion. Though the above terms, as well as the overall gay identity and culture, may suggest the influence of the West in their emphasis on the binary opposition of concealing and disclosing, they may not denote the same structure of how the closet works in the West. Samuel A. Chambers writes: "being in the closet is not simply a choice one makes, since heteronormativity

28 Henry Urbach, 'Closets, Clothes, disClosure' in *Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary* (eds. Katerina Ruedi, Sarah Wigglesworth, Duncan McCorquodale). London: Black Dog Publishing Limited. 1996. p. 248.





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continually pushes gays toward the closet."²⁹ According to Chambers, heteronormativity is like a rule, a set of patterns of beliefs that takes heterosexual desires or system of binary opposition of gender as a norm. The closet, then, may offer a negative attitude towards the space of hiding and concealing identity, as a space of oppression. *Kalatesa* can be seen as heteronormativity that demands and expects certain rules to be upheld in the society. Nonetheless, it can be a space of creativity for Thai homosexuals, which they can choose to move in and out of according to *kalatesa*. It is the 'face' value that is important, as I have suggested in the previous section. It is offered a freedom from being criticised that is in contrast to the Western notion of the freedom to criticise.³⁰ The latter may not go down well in Thai society, where conflicts are not desirable.

Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd may not only be the condition for homosexual identity but can also be seen in the conditions for gay spaces in Bangkok. I would argue that there is a change in sexual landscapes where many gay spaces have redefined the boundary between public and private. While the area of Patpong on Silom Road, known for its red-light district and the most visible commercial gay scene in Thailand, and many other gay commercial sites such as saunas, restaurants and bars, are being closeted and spatially fixed in the city, simultaneously an increasing number of spaces, predominantly heterosexually coded, such as children playgrounds, shopping malls, as well as the more traditional gay spaces – parks and the area around the royal court that used to be associated with the *katoey* – are also emerging as openly gay spaces. These spaces are sites of contradiction, in which their original functions and meanings can be countered through particular acts of cruising

29 Samuel A. Chambers, 'Telepistemology of the Closet; or, The Queer Politics of Six Feet Under', *The Journal of American Culture* 26(1), 2003, p. 36.

30 William S W Lim. *Alternative (Post) Modernity: An Asian Perspective*. Singapore: Select Publishing. 2003. p. 73.





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and sexual activity. Their meanings can be multiple and the old meaning can be undone. A reading of the different kinds of spaces –Silom Soi 2, which is a more closeted space, and other alternative spaces in relation to the lived experience of gays – may explain how the boundary between public and private may have been unsettled and may suggest the *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* conditions of Bangkok urban landscapes which allow multiplicity and contradiction to exist, in a way transforming social relations and space itself.





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MAPPING OUT HOMOSEXUALITY: SILOM AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE SPACES

Today, Bangkokians prefer seeing themselves as adaptable parts of a dynamic topology, both local and global, primitive and modern, facialised and embodied.

Brian P. McGrath, *Bangkok Simultopia*, p. 212

Silom is the location of many big corporations, financial institutions and bank headquarters, both local and international, and has become the most important street for economic development in the country. During the day, Silom Road is full of business employees and street vendors selling all kinds of products, ranging from food to clothes, bags, cosmetics, etc, to accommodate people working in the area. During the night, it becomes a gathering place for all sorts of people through to the next morning. The main area, I would say, is within walking distance between one McDonald's at the CP Tower opposite the Bangkok Christian Hospital, near Patpong, to the next McDonald's at Robinson's Department Store on the corner of Silom and Rama 4 Road.

Walking through the Silom area at nightfall, the multiplicity it offers is clearly seen, as McGrath remarks at the beginning of the section. Almost every night, a group of deaf people gathers in front of McDonald's at the CP Tower, waving their hands and communicating intensely in signs for hours and hours, while inside McDonald's many gay men spend their time waiting for friends, waiting to move on to a discotheque late into the night, and many use it as a cruising area. It is also where university students gather to talk about their research, businessmen discuss sales plans, film lovers are waiting to buy rare films late in the night, etc. In front of the next building, the California Fitness Centre, many sales representatives are busy selling memberships. This side of the street is scattered with many vendors selling fruit and other local foods as well as stalls offering merchandise



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such as clothes, foreign DVDS, slippers, and even garlands of flowers in baskets sold by elderly women. Walking to the end of the street, where one of the prestigious hotels, Dusit Thani, and the new underground station are situated, there is a pathway leading to Lumpini Park and a King Rama VI statue overlooking Silom Road.

On the opposite side, the site of another McDonald's in Robinson's Department Store, is where cruising activities may take place before and after the discotheques close. Walking back through the side streets, the stalls are crowded and block the street views all the way to Patpong. Many small dead-end alleys are visible along the way, including Silom Soi 2 at the heart of the gay commercial scenes. It is no more than 100 metres long and cramped with bars, restaurants and discotheques. In front of it is a gate that occasionally closes during the day and a sign saying "Private property". A few blocks away, Silom Soi 4 offers alternative night spots for both straight and gay. A few small *sois* away is Patpong, one of the large *sois* connecting Silom and Surawong. During the day, Patpong is the only connection between two streets that cars can pass through. During the night, with empty business buildings, the street of Silom still remains busy with street vendors and tourists. Patpong turns into a night bazaar and red-light district, a place where you can find cheap fake designer clothes, handbags, expensive watches, Thai souvenirs, etc, along with go-go bars on both sides of the street, offering exotic Thai women.

The Silom experience is quite unique in that the two sexual spaces, homosexual and heterosexual, coexist. While Patpong mainly targets heterosexual tourists, Silom Soi 2 is mainly aimed at Thais and Asians, including many gay men in neighbouring countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia,





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etc, where homosexuality is a taboo subject and even illegal. Patpong is seen as part of a famous tourist destination—generating a large revenue for the country, which enables gay venues in Soi 2 to be hidden and closeted within the political economy. Geographically, Soi 2 is so well-hidden in the small alleyway that it can pass unnoticed, particularly during the day, and the area in general is quite hidden behind the merchandise stalls, so that no view of it can be seen from the street. At the same time, the whole area is surrounded and hidden by all the high-rise buildings and hotels, while residential areas are further away. According to Michael P. Brown, the close is a “production not only of heteronormativity in urban space, but simultaneously of capitalist relations.”³¹ Brown has stressed the closet metaphor that often turns on the visual trope of its contents being unseen, as he suggests that the gay nightclubs, saunas, bars are located where they are largely invisible to the public eye.³² While Patpong is considered to be associated with foreigners, some of the Thai values can be ignored by the authorities and the general public. Soi 2, as part of Patpong, is also considered foreign by many Thais, who are prepared to exempt and ignore much that they consider ‘un-Thai’.

For me, Patpong epitomises the way the closet works in the West. It has become a place where gay people meet up and enjoy various activities on offer in Soi 2 and Soi 4 and has become part of the formation of gay identity among middle-class gay men whose lifestyles are based on commercial gay scenes such as bars, restaurants and saunas at the centre of the formation as they attempt to gain economic and political power through the spending of money. It shows how the spatially fixed Soi 2 and Soi 4 encourage the successful commodification of same-sex activities. Knopp points out

31 Michael P. Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 56.

32 *ibid.* p. 58.





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in his important work *Sexuality and Urban Space: A framework for analysis* the relationship between sexuality and capitalism in relation to urban space:

The proliferation of commodified homosexual experience, for example, led to a homosexual consciousness among some people, and this was very threatening to heterosexualised gender relations underlying the industrial city.³³

Soi 2 and Soi 4 are not only successful in terms of capitalism but also encourage homosexual consciousness, which in turn allows them to be more than commercial areas but also to play a significant role in forming gay identity based on the Western model, and attempting to depart from *katoey's* model as highlighted in some of the following interviews:

Somprasong: I have spent my gay life in Silom for some time now. Three or four years ago before I graduated I spent a lot of time with friends who call themselves katoey and go out to normal bars where men and women would go. At the time, I felt being more woman. I also thought at the time gay bars have quite a scary image but when I met an old friends from high school and took me to gay bars particularly in Silom I have changed my mind. I reconsidered myself less of a woman than a gay man. Silom has changed my attitude towards gay. Because gays at Silom are well-educated and well manners which differ from other places. So I decided to come here whenever I have free time.³⁴

33 Lawrence Knopp, *Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis in Mapping Desire* (eds. David Bell & Gill Valentine), London: Routledge, 1995, p. 155.

34 Various interviews with gay men who frequent the Silom area by Pichet Saibon in "Gay: A Life Scene at Silom". in *Life at the*





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Ekpoom: Life as a gay, friends are the most important thing. It is good to have gay friends around you and I can only have that feeling when I am in Silom. Silom has made the world ours.■

From the above interviews it is quite clear that Silom has become part of homosexual life and how Silom has helped to construct their new-identity. Since the 1980s, at the height of the AIDS crisis, Silom and Patpong have been at the centre of the construction of gay identity in Thailand. It is undeniable that gay identity has been constructed following the Western model, as masculine gay men attempt to form a new identity, encouraged by the lifestyle offered on Silom, as a move away from the traditional model of the *katoey*, a subject of discussion in the next chapter. Though it has not happened overnight and cannot be said to derive from Western influence alone, developments within the area have continued for over 40 years.

Since its establishment, the area has been associated with *farang* ("white foreigner"). Patpong developed along with the increase in prostitution in Thailand. In Bangkok, prostitution was transformed through the military presence, especially the American presence in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, and international tourism in the 1980s and 1990s. The red-light district sites were created and visible in different parts of Thailand where military bases were located, especially in Pattaya (Chonburi Province) and Sattahib.

Margin: Self and Meanings (ed. Paritta Chalermkiao-Koanantakul), Bangkok: Amarin Printing, 2002, p. 63.

35 *ibid.* p. 65.



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At the time, Patpong already had an established heterosexual sex trade, including go-go bars, brothels and hotels. But during the time when American servicemen were stationed in Thailand, up until 1975, thousands of them were coming to Bangkok on "Rest and Recreation" (R&R) leave from Vietnam, and the sex trade expanded, with numerous bars and massage parlours opening in the area.³⁶ Following the success of Patpong and the first gay bar, the Sea Hag, opened by a foreigner in the late 1950s in the Bangrak area, the Twilight Bar opened its doors on Patpong Road in the early 1960s.³⁷ The Twilight Bar was modelled after the female go-go bars in Patpong and it was the first Thai bar to have off-boys.³⁸

By 1976, when the American military were expelled from Thailand by a nationalist civilian government, Patpong began to establish its reputation among tourists. However, both American servicemen and a growth in tourism at a later date have been important factors in the proliferation of homosexual bars in Patpong. Despite the early settlement and the use of gay bars mainly by foreigners, Thai men are increasingly becoming involved. In the early 1980s, many gay bars and other establishments sprang up in non-tourist areas of Bangkok such as Sapan-kwai, Sukhumvit and Klong Lord. The gay commercial venues modelled after the West in style and operation were aimed at the mass market. The bars have provided entertainment venues and places for socialising.

The mid-1980s seem to have represented the development of the commercial gay scene in Bangkok,

36 Thanh-Dam Troung, *Sex, Money and Morality: Prostitution and Tourism in South-East Asia*, London: Zed Books Btd., 1990, p. 162.

37 Peter Jackson, *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand, Bangkok*: Bua Luang Books, 1995, p. 230.

38 *ibid.* p. 230





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and considerable changes were occurring at this time in gay lifestyles and in the numbers of homosexual men living relatively open gay lives in Bangkok.³⁹ This social and cultural shift provided the basis for a rapid expansion of commercial gay facilities and publications after the mid-1980s. Beginning in about 1985 and paralleling the Kingdom's rapid economic growth in the previous decade, the number of gay establishments exploded. From the 1990s on, various gay clubs, pubs, cafés and restaurants, including a few of lesbian places, have opened in the Patpong area, known as Silom Soi 2, that separated from Patpong 1, 2 and has now become a well-known gay street and an essential part of the gay lifestyle. Gay saunas have also enjoyed an increasing popularity, and have been built one after one another in the area around Patpong. Many of these places were owned by foreigners both from the West and from Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Japan, in joint ventures with gay businessmen (as the law does not allow foreigners to own land or any business unless they are married to a Thai, or through joint ventures with Thai people.) Nowadays, many gay commercial spaces such as saunas, bars, cafés, and restaurants are owned by Thais and are scattered around Bangkok rather than just in the inner city area.

However, in contrast to the growth of gay scenes and subcultures, there have been few social and political gay groups in Thailand. As Jackson writes, unlike the case of gay men in many Western European countries and North America, he does not believe that Thailand – or Bangkok – has a gay community in the sense of a group of people who share common goals socially and politically.⁴⁰ This is not so surprising if we consider the following factors: firstly, this group of gay people is already well-established in terms of both lifestyle and economy and to become involved in political movements

39 *ibid.*, p. 232.

40 Interview with Peter Jackson. *Pink Ink*. Vol. 1. No. 2. November. 1997.





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is not part of their lifestyle. Secondly, the original purpose of these places was commercial and they were intended for entertainment, so that forming groups for social or political reasons has not been the aim of middle-class Thai homosexuals. Thirdly, as I discussed earlier, Thai homosexuals tend to behave in a discreet way in public and not discuss their sexuality overtly; therefore to form a group might well expose them publicly as gay. There are a few exceptions, in the form of some gay groups working on the AIDS issue. However, in the case of lesbians, the situation is rather different. During the 1990s, Anjaree, the only official lesbian group, worked on the level of a social and political movement for lesbian rights.■

The increasing visibility of the commercial gay scene in Silom Soi 2 has not provoked threats from the authorities in Thailand because the gay scene has been closely related to the sites of prostitution in Patpong, which is itself directly connected to the *farang* and the Thai economy, as I have suggested earlier. However, I should mention here that the growing number of gay venues have not been uninterrupted by the authorities. Under the new government, ThairakThai, in 2001, Interior Minister Purachai Piemsombun launched the Social Order Campaign in order to clean up the nation's image, rid it of sexual 'misbehaviour' and restore Thai culture and values to the society. He tightened control over night spots, both heterosexual and homosexual. Police occasionally raided clubs and bars in an attempt to curb drug use and prostitution. Soi 2 and many saunas were targeted and the raids were shown on the national evening news. Many cruising areas such as the Royal Palace and Royal Field, as well as some major parks like Lumpini Park, were patrolled. Signs reading "Indecent behaviour is prohibited" were put up in some of the small parks near bridges in a number of areas, such as

41 At the present time, 2006, the group has not been active for a few years, since the founder has moved abroad, although a group called 'Lesla' was formed in 2000 and is still very active today.





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Suan Rachayothin. However, the campaign lasted only a year or so, as Piemsomboon's strict policy was heavily criticised by the public.⁴²

Patpong itself has been turned into a site of commodification, and images of female sexuality have become a factor in the country's economic growth. The development of Silom 2 has also contributed to the economy as a result of the influx of tourists from both Asia and the West. Due to restrictions in neighbouring countries, Thailand has become a favorite destination among gay Asian men. The commercial gay scene continues to grow and expand into nearby areas without any severe restrictions from the authorities because of the large revenue it generates. While many Thais find the view of international media that try to link Thailand with the sex trade, the authorities remain untouched by the sex industry. Highly concerned about the nation's image, the authorities- instead denounced the anti-sex trade activists for giving the country a 'bad press'.⁴³

Sexuality and Patpong have been seen as inseparable in the eyes of both Thais and foreigners. Homosexuals have been viewed only in terms of their sexuality, which they try to avoid. Despite its close location to Patpong and its similar economic function, Silom Soi 2 positions itself completely differently vis-à-vis the users. A particular space for gays has been established which "provides a space where queer sexuality can be viewed, displayed, expressed, and consumed."⁴⁴ It is a space

42 Amid rumours of conflicts within the cabinet, Piemsomboon resigned from the government before his term was over.

43 Nerida Cook, "'Dutiful Daughters', Estranged sisters: Women in Thailand", in *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia* (Sen Krishna and Mailla Stivens, eds.). London: Routledge, 1998.

44 James Polchin, 'Having Something to Wear: The Landscape of Identity on Christopher Street', in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (eds. by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, Seattle: Bay Press, 1997, p. 384.





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that confirms the existence of the homosexual in the society, however confined within Silom Soi 2.

Therefore I would like to point out that in the absence of a strong community or a particular group, gays have very much depended upon gay commercial spaces to meet up and share their interests as well as for sexual purposes. However, Silom has not been the only gay space in the city: there have also been other areas of gay commercial scenes, as was particularly the case in the late 1990s. While Silom remains a fixed closet space in the city, there have also been other alternative and increasingly important spaces for the construction of homosexual identity. Although some of the spaces, such as the area around the Royal Court and nearby locations like Makkawan Bridge have been meeting places since the 1960s, mostly for katoeys, nowadays they are frequented by male prostitutes. There are also other spaces that could be considered 'queer spaces', which enable homosexuality and identity to "survive and to gradually expand their influence and opportunities to live fully."⁴⁵ However, the idea of queer space is quite problematic, as George Chauncey has seen, as a strategy for gay and lesbian people:

There is no queer space; there are only spaces used by queers or put to queer use. Space has no natural character, no inherent meaning, no intrinsic status as public or private. ... Nothing illustrates this general principle more clearly than the tactics developed by generations of gay men and lesbians to put the spaces of the dominant culture to queer purposes.⁴⁶

45 Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yoland Retter, 'Lost in Space: Queer Theory and Community Activism at the Fin-de-Millenaire', in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, Washington: Bay Press, 1997, p. 3.

46 George Chauncey, 'Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets', *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (ed. Joel





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I would like to apply Chauncey's ideas in looking at some alternative spaces, including the area near the Royal Palace and parks, and how they might help to redefine the public and private spaces with less defined boundaries than gay spaces like Silom.

These kinds of spaces, in my view, have given rise to William S W Lim's discussion of "spaces of indeterminacy", where he suggests that they vary in size, ranging from a large area to the cracks and gaps of new urban projects such as the disused land under highways.⁴⁷ They are the kinds of spaces, pluralistic and complex, that have within them the potential for creativity. The area around the Royal Palace, or Pranakorn area, which has been left out of the rapid urban expansion, may offer an interesting insight into the present conditions of Bangkok urban landscapes. While it has become symbolic of Thailand and is at the centre of the tourism industry, its area has been left largely untouched by capitalism. The Royal Palace, which includes the Emerald Buddha Temple, is surrounded by many official buildings: on the right, the Ministry of Defence and the Supreme Court; and on the left, the Royal Navy Club. Their existence is merely symbolic as many of these offices have recently been moved to adjacent provinces to relieve traffic problems in Bangkok. There are also three universities in the area: Thammasat University, Silpakorn University, and the university for monks, Rajavittayalai. The main square, with the Royal Field in the middle, is where various activities take place, ranging from Royal ceremonies such as the Plough Ceremony, to New Year celebrations and large scale political demonstrations.

During the day, the area is filled with a mixture of tourists, university students, monks, and the Sanders), New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, p. 224.

47 William S W Lim. *Alternative (Post) Modernity: An Asian Perspective*. Singapore: Select Publishing. 2003. p. 73.



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general public, who come to use the pier to travel across the Chao Phraya River, as well as collectors who in search of Buddha lockets. At night, it is a quiet place taken over by minorities such as the homeless and prostitutes of both sexes. While female prostitutes hang around the Royal Field, the male street-sex workers can be found mainly in the small park next to Ministry of Defence, Suan Saranrom, which is quite difficult to see through from the street. Many cars drive by slowly, gazing, before stopping to pick someone up. Through sexual signals that play out onto the body, the area has turned into a space where desires and needs can be articulated among gay men. Even the traditional areas with no commercial gay spaces cannot escape capitalism, which still overflows into them. Without the presence of physical commercial spaces, the bodies have become commodities that enable desires to take place. Through *kalatesa*, during the day the body has to be disciplined because of such respectable spaces as the Royal Palace and the temples. It is even necessary for people, particularly tourists, to change their outfits to more appropriate ones – long skirts, long trousers, long-sleeved shirts – as well as to exhibit appropriate behaviours. At night, on the other hand, bodies are used in ways to heighten the intensity of desire – sleeveless shirts to show off muscles, a beautiful make-up for a feminine effect, etc. "Together with the marginalised and the subalterns, they create a potpourri of spontaneity and chance encounters."⁴⁸

Many park areas, including small parks next to blocks of flats or below bridges, have also been popular alternative spaces for meetings among gays. They have certainly also provided a kind of intermediate space where the 'old' meaning has been destabilised, where a space has been created for different narratives and meanings to take over. From a historical point of view, the notion of

48 William S W Lim. *Alternative (Post) Modernity: An Asian Perspective*. Singapore: Select Publishing. 2003. p. 17.





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'park' was long associated with the Royal family. Professor Kaisaeng Sukawattana notes, in relation to a story about Suan Saranrom, next to Royal Palace, that it was once mentioned by King Rama IV as a pleasant and peaceful place that he intended to live in after the end of his reign.⁴⁹ Today, it is quite unimaginable to think of the same Suan Saranrom, mentioned above, as it is now known.

For King Rama V, the concept of the public park was initially an attempt to organise the town in a modern way and to signify the modernity that Siam (the then name of Thailand) wanted to portray. Fences were erected around the park to keep the area clean and organised, and very much the same principles operate today. It was very much a Western's concept of organising city spaces according to types of activities in Victorian period.⁵⁰ Many public parks today are still used the fences to protect the area. Although the public parks today may have put into various functions such as Jatujak Park, which is well-known for its Sunday market, or Lumpini Park where many elderly joggers, body builders share the space. The latter is also famous for gay cruising area early in the morning when it opens for joggers and late at night. The public parks have provided a space for different kinds of people who use them their own purposes at different times. The idea of multiple used of public parks also extends to smaller ones that spread around the urban development around Bangkok such as the area under the bridge.

Kaisri Paksukcharorn further suggests in her paper at *Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: The Bangkok Invisible Landscapes (2005)* of a new kind of squat, a 'fragmented Situationistic Spaces' that takes

49 Narupol Duangviseth, "The City Park Myth: Narratives of Bangkok Gay Males in Cyberspace" in *Ratasarth San* (Political Sciences Journal) (ed. Thanet Wongyannava), 1 (2002), p. 90.

50 David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge, 2000. p. 22.





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place in many cities around the world. "They are almost legitimated in a way in which they are a consequence of the processes of de-industrialisation, global capitalisation, suburbanisation and changes in transportation methods and highway construction in the past 50 years."⁵¹ These spaces have created an 'alternative model for living and have transformed various structures into multiple-use buildings'. It is also similar to Lim's 'spaces of indeterminacy' that these kind of spaces have offered a kind of creativity that resist any conventional meanings that imposed by the authorities. The multi-functions of spaces have offered a chance to break away from the norms and focus more on other aspects of the city, including the sexual one. It also offers a glimpse of Foucault's heterotopia in a way that he suggests in the last characteristic of heterotopia that it has a function that takes place between two opposite poles:

On the one hand they perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented. On the other, they have the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-concieved and in a sketchy state.⁵²

In many cases, these kind of indeterminate alternative spaces space has revealed to us more of how the city should be and experienced. These have led to a need to rethink and redefine their meanings from microscopic spaces to the larger one, from the nation to the global. I have to agree with Chris Berry, when he writes that homosexuals in East Asia "can threaten to confound

51 Kaisri Paksukchareon, *Made in Bangkok: Testing the Boundary of Inclusiveness of Public Spaces*, a seminar paper at Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: The Bangkok Invisible Landscapes (2005).

52 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' in *Diacritics* 16. 1986. p.27.



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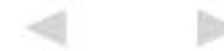
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the boundaries between East and West and between past and present that are used to constitute the nation-states,"²⁴ as seen in some of the spaces discussed. Moreover, the boundaries separating public and private also need to be redefined. As I demonstrated above, they can be rather *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, depending on the time and who is acting on them.

In the following section, I would like to continue this discussion on representation and how Bangkok has been represented in relation to homosexuality; how the binary of *pid/perd* constructs homosexual identity, which I attempt to demonstrate through the films *I am a Man* (1987) and *Blue Journey* (1998).

53 Chris Berrv. *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topologies of Desire*. Australia: EmPress Publishing. 1994. p. 76.





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I AM A "MAN"

Through the film *I am a Man* (*chan-pu-chai-na-ya*), directed by M.L. Bhandevanop Devakul, I attempt to unravel some of problematic and complex questions of the politics of spaces between public and private that have played a significant part in relation to Thai homosexuality, as discussed earlier. The film has stood out in Thai film history as being the first homosexually-themed film depicting less 'typical' homosexual characters and attempting to move away from the recurring theme of the suffering homosexual (particularly *katoey* and *tom*) who is always abandoned by a 'real' man or woman. Made in the late 1980s, at one point the film could be seen as homosexuals being forced to be contained within their own private space and bounded within the space of Patpong, as also suggested in a few homosexual films and in the attitudes of the general population at the time. I would argue that, at the same time, it offers some glimpses into an attempt to blur boundaries. Throughout this section I would like to explore several control mechanisms, such as the heterosexual 'gaze', which have been employed by hegemonic heterosexuality to control and eliminate homosexuals from their privileged public spaces, and at the same time the mechanisms – for instance, the creation of fantasy spaces – employed by homosexuals to oppose the dominant heterosexual ideology. Moreover, I would like to discuss some techniques in the films which have been used to establish a clear boundary between the public space of the Bangkok street and the private space of homosexuality, for instance by creating different meanings, emotions, roles, and identity through these two spaces.





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BACKGROUND

Based loosely on the film *The Boys in the Band* (William Friedkin, 1970), *I am a Man* looks at the way homosexuality has been viewed in Thai society and how it has managed to create its own space within the Thai context, despite the fact that its original story originated in the West.⁵⁴ What is interesting here is the way in which an American story has been exported to countries around the world, whether in Europe or Asia, and how it has been transformed in different locations, so that in many ways it has gone through what Ken Nielsen calls “the process of double other”, drawing attention to both cultural ethnicity and sexuality.⁵⁵ Reproducing the American other in a different culture causes a ‘doubled layer of otherness’, which is also the case with *The Boys in the Band* in Thai culture.⁵⁶ It is also a strategy to make it more acceptable to a Thai audience, allowing it to distance itself from the subject.

While not being the first film to have a homosexual character as a protagonist, *I am a Man* has raised a further problematic around the notion of “gayness”. The first film, *The Last Song* (*Pleng Sudtai*, Pisan Akaraseranee, 1986), narrates a more stereotypical tale of gays, particularly the *katoey*

54 *The Boys in the Band* was originally a theatrical play by Mart Crowley which opened New York in 1968 with such success that in the 1970s the film with the same name reached an even larger American audience. It was the first mainstream Hollywood feature film relating to homosexuality. The play itself, after its opening, was adapted and played in many countries around the world. The film’s release coincided with the gay movement in America and the 1969 we now know as ‘Stonewall’, when the police raided the gay bar of the same name, leading to the spread of the gay liberation movement across America. For a further study on the development of homosexuality in films and the representation of homosexuals in America, please see Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1981).

55 Ken Nielsen, *The Double Other: the Case of The Boys in the Band*, Copenhagen, 1969, www.lisa-raymond.com/ASTR/nielsen.htm.

56 *ibid.*





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(transvestites), in the rather confined space of *Tiffany* (a famous transvestite show in Pattaya), ending with the suicide of the protagonist. It portrays homosexuals in a more acceptable way to Thai society, as the *katoey* were already cast as a 'second type of woman' (*sao-praphet-song*, another term for *katoey*), which is one of the Thai social mechanisms to avoid disruption of the sexual binary *puchai/puying* – man/woman – including punishment for not being a "real" woman at the end. Moreover, by being associated with the entertainment business and tourism industry, the *katoey* in *The Last Song* are excused from ordinary social "norms" as long as they remain confined in their own space. It is rather different from *I am a Man*, since some of the characters resist the notion of gayness, associated at the time with femininity and categorised according to the Thai sex/gender system.

Released in 1988, *I am a Man* was a blockbuster hit as a result of Thai people's curiosity, as it came out at a time when Thai society as a whole had not yet fully realised the existence of homosexuality and hardly any representations of homosexuals were to be seen. *I am a Man* followed the same route as the Hollywood version by starting with the play of the same name. Having enjoyed a successful run at the Monthienthong Theatre in the Monthien Hotel in the Patpong – Silom area, the film company, Poonsap Productions, was interested in making a feature film, as it saw an opportunity to attract a large audience. It would not have been possible to make the film without the big success in the theatre. It was a rather different story for the theatre to take a chance on the play, since at the time the theatre was only enjoyed by a small part of the population of Bangkok, a privileged class who were ready for anything new, particularly from the Western world. Moreover, being shown in Patpong area, the play unfolded in a rather "closed" space within the public sphere



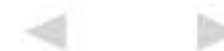


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of Bangkok, both for geographic and social reasons, as I discussed earlier. By taking place in this rather "closed" space of Bangkok, it enabled a play with a controversial homosexual theme to run without any interference from the authorities.





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THE STORY OF I AM A MAN

The film centres on a fancy-dress birthday party for an old "queen" at a wealthy old-style Thai house belonging to Mod, a self-hating gay man, the main character. The party is supposed to be exclusively for his friends – Nat (a jewelry salesman who blames his parents for being gay), Dang (an art director in an advertising company who has just cast a young man and asked him to strip off), Em (a drag queen who finds out that his "pet" boy is having an affair with a "real" woman), Lak (a high-school teacher and Dang's partner) – but is interrupted by the appearance of Un, Mod's old friend. Un has an ambiguous background, particularly in terms of identity. Mod and his friends have to put on a "masculine" act as a cover-up for the flamboyant costumes and heavy make-up, since Un is unaware of Mod's identity. Un shows his uncomfortable feelings towards Em, who still behaves in his usual manner, and focuses much of his attention on Lak, whom Un can associate with as Lak looks like a "real" man. Mod then comes to suspect Un's identity, accusing him of being gay. Mod invents a telephone game and forces everyone to participate. To get a full point, participants need to call the person they love and say "I love you". The film concludes when Un calls his wife and leads to the disappointment of Mod.





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CONSTRUCTING THE BOUNDARY

In many ways, the film *I am a Man* clearly establishes a boundary between two different spaces: a public one, where the characters have to follow the social norms and maintain their public images, and a private one, where homosexual desire can be allowed. The fence surrounding the house is symbolic, both in terms of geography and mentally, a boundary between the public space of Bangkok and Mod's private space within the house. It is this boundary that allows Mod and his friends to live in two separate worlds. The film—clearly shows the difference between these two spaces throughout the film, for instance in terms of identity, meaning, emotion, and gender roles, by the construction of various cinematic languages – camera angles, editing, and narrative. It also constantly makes the spectator aware of the difference between these two spaces and ultimately leads the spectator to cross the boundary into the unknown private world of these characters. For me, the best demonstration is none other than the transformation of Mod in the early scenes of the film.

Mod, in his pilot uniform, arrives at the airport, at the beginning of the film, in the familiar image of the traditional Thai film hero –a wealthy, masculine, educated man (Figure 1). It evokes the typical exposition of Thai melodramas – the protagonist arrives at the airport, his family is waiting at home, the beginning of the search for his own family. The camera positions itself as an observer of which Mod is unaware, and follows from behind as he walks among the crowd at the airport (Figure 2). The camera does not try to show Mod's perception in order to involve the spectator with the character,





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which allows the spectator to judge or evaluate the images on screen. For the spectator, at this point, Mod has passed as a heterosexual man through his masculine appearance and behaviour 'appropriate' to a 'real man' in public. His 'public identity' of heterosexual man, then, has been constructed to measure up to the spectator's expectation of a traditional hero.⁵⁷ However, at the same time we can see this sequence as a parody of the construction of masculinity in Thai cinematic convention, in which the male protagonist is always in uniform, well-educated, good-looking and sophisticated, since the spectators are already aware of the kind of film they are watching, the title of the film being *Chan Pu-Chai Na Ya* (*I am a Man with feminine pronouns – na ya*).

Later on in the film comes the first shot of the house. It is an old-style Thai house surrounded by tall fences, which separates an outside world from the rest of the house. The house itself, according to its style in the Thai context, belongs to the old elite group of Thai society, and not many of these kinds of houses survive from that particular period, the beginning of the economic booming the late 1980s. Most of the houses are on Sathorn Road, next to Silom Road, and were built at least fifty years ago for bureaucrats and members of the elite. Nowadays, most of them are being sold to corporations which use Sathorn and Silom Roads as a centre, or to foreigners who want a taste of living in a Thai-style house. The use of this style of house in the film implies that there is almost no space left for Mod, or specifically for homosexuals.

In front of the house we also see the image of a man kissing a woman in a rather open space where

⁵⁷ According to Madan Sarup, identity can be perceived in two different ways, first as 'public identity', which is how 'others' have typified us, and secondly as 'private identity', which is how we see ourselves. *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996. p. 14.





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one can be seen in the middle of the day, which is an unlikely scene in that Thai people rarely express themselves in a passionate way in public (Figure 3). It is in this space, on the other side of the fence, that we begin to realise the possibility of something happening which may not conform to social norms. In the next shot, Mod arrives at the house, and it is here that the film does not meet the spectator's expectations. He arrives home, where no one is waiting for him, and is instead greeted by a young male servant. Moreover, when he enters the house, we learn from an old maid the news that his mother has called to ask him to move to a condominium as this house will soon be rented out. His reply to the maid, "Where would I be without this place?", once again confirms his homosexual status, as we will learn later on in the film, and the implication that without the house there will soon be no place left for him.

Mod then enters his bedroom, his most private space in the house, which he will use to transform himself (Figure 4). The bedroom shows the different levels of 'private' or 'closed' space even within the private space of Mod's house and suggests the way in which particular spaces are unfixed and become both public and private spaces, as is demonstrated throughout the film. Not until he plays music from his classic record player and the song "Violet Dream" begins, do we then gradually enter into Mod's private world. The lyric of the song goes briefly as follows:

*"If only I can choose to be like others
I don't have to live in sorrow however I can't resist
Resist, my desire*





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*I live in fear, fear from thousands of eyes
Waiting to convict me of guilt
No one wants to be "pian" "pitsadan" (crazy, deviant)
But I couldn't deny myself
Every day I pray and endure
Impossible to find anyone to understand..."*

Chalit Fuang-arom, who plays Mod, sings the song. It does have a double meaning both in the actor's real life and for the character he performs, as Chalit's homosexuality in real life was an open secret. However, it was not until he played this character that he confirmed his homosexual status.⁵⁸ In addition, the director and most of the actors, both professional and non-professional, (besides Dr. Seri, there is another university lecturer, Paothong Thongjua) were using this film as a way of expressing themselves. Though Bhandevanop has never publicly come out, Dr. Seri did come out publicly through a newspaper interview in the mid-1980s.⁵⁹

The lyrics of the song reflect Mod's private thoughts, the private moment of fear and sorrow which most Thai homosexuals experience, or at least did in the 1980s, as some Thai homosexuals do believe that being homosexual in their present life results from the karma of having committed adultery in a past life and that it is their duty to pay for the wrong they have done in order to be

58 The song was written by Dr. Seri Wongmontha, one of the cast and co-writer of the film. He wrote the song specifically for this film.

59 Chalit at that time was married with two children and up until this film he always portrayed masculine heterosexual characters.

60 Dr. Seri is also one of the well-known gay figures in Thai society, a former Deputy Dean at the Faculty of Communication, who was later forced to resign as a result of being accused of over-exposing his homosexuality.





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reborn into a better life. It is therefore their 'destiny' to endure sorrow and suffering in this life, which is beyond their ability to change. I see this view as one way to explain the less discriminative attitude of Thais towards homosexuality, compared to that in Western countries. However, in a society that builds around positive images but where homosexuality is viewed as *pian* ("crazy") or *pittsadan* ("deviant"), and damaging to one's image, this has meant that homosexuals suffer from feelings of shame and embarrassment by the mere fact of being themselves. As already suggested, for most of recent Thai history homosexuality has neither been considered immoral by Buddhism nor illegal by the political authorities. But this does not mean that homosexuality is considered normative or acceptable behaviour in Thailand. Religious and legal sanctions may be absent, but traditional cultural sanctions against homosexuality are very strong, as the Thai homosexual is likely to suffer severe, traumatic or subtle changes in body language, attitude or tone of voice on the part of other people which a Westerner may regard as insignificant. It is because of these sanctions that most Thai homosexuals are extremely reluctant for their sexual preference to be known and have tried to avoid being labelled as gay or lesbian, as in the case of Mod/Chalit who in real life did not come out publicly but only through the film. In other words, as has been suggested by some Western academics writing about Thai male homosexuality in Thailand, the Western model of 'coming out' was considered a non-issue or rather a white model among Thai homosexuals. Thai people try to avoid confrontation that might lead to unpleasant feelings, and if one attempts to identify oneself as "gay" or "lesbian", it is as if one is "labelling" oneself an enemy of society or a deviant person who will disrupt social harmony. No matter how suspicious people may be that he/she is homosexual, as



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long as they have not identified or labelled themselves as 'gay' or 'lesbian', the public can tolerate and accept them in order to avoid any confrontations. While it is important to Western homosexuals to "come out" publicly or to their community as more emphasis is put on the importance of "being oneself" and "being true to one's feelings", Thai homosexuals prefer to keep their sexuality a private matter.⁶¹ It is also unlikely for Thai people to discuss sex or sexuality in public, and conflicts with family, friends or colleagues are avoided. Therefore, I would argue that Thai homosexuals could profit from the separation of the public and private spheres, as we consider that what a man or woman does in the bedroom is not relevant as long as he/she dresses and behaves according to social norms that dictate public behaviour.

While the song begins, Mod slowly transforms himself by taking off his pilot's uniform, while we see the images through the reflections in the mirror (Figure 5-6). The camera has now changed position, from being an observer to becoming more involved with Mod, and towards the end of this scene Mod has taken over the gaze and is no longer an object of the gaze in that particular space, as he speaks directly to the camera. The shots continue with a series of close-ups of Mod dressing up: putting on leggings and make-up, which we sometimes see through the mirror (Figure 7). As he finishes, the camera pans from a statue of a masculine man in a suit on the corner of his bed to Mod as he performs some kind of dance in front of the mirror in fancy dress and full make-up (Figure 8). Then he speaks directly to the camera: "*Chan Puchai Na Ya*" ("I am a man" with a feminine pronoun) (Figure 9). It is now that the spectator crosses the boundary and completely enters into

61 Peter Jackson argues in *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand* that "the gap between appearance and reality in everyday life in Thailand does not always cause the same tensions for Thai homosexual men as it does for Westerners" because of their moral fear of "being oneself". It is rather contradictory for Thais as we put more importance on one's image than on being true to oneself.





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the private world of Mod. The spectator also becomes aware of the dominant (homosexual) gaze in this closed space of the house, which is a reversal of what occurs in the public space of Bangkok. In this way, the spectator can now accept the challenge of the subversive act being performed by homosexuals, as it is only limited to this closed space, while the spectator's or the public space is still safe from being challenged. While speaking directly to the camera, Mod also becomes aware of the existence of the spectator who is now looking at him. As a homosexual body, then, he is still an object of the spectator's gaze on the other of the screen. The screen has become a stage for a performance which homosexuals have made visible in society through cabaret shows, sex shows or performing arts, where they are always the object of the gaze.⁶² The significance of the gaze is also magnified by the lyrics of the song, particularly the line "*I live in fear, fear from thousands of eyes*", as he feels he is different from others and his behaviour is being described by heterosexual society through the negative terms *pian* ("crazy") and *pitsadan* ("deviant"). I would like to point out that the heterosexual 'gaze', the 'gaze' that claims authority in the public sphere, has been one of the most powerful mechanisms of heterosexual hegemony as a way of non-verbally discriminating against others who are different from themselves and reinforcing the homosexual position as the deviant "Other" in the society.

As he is saying "*Chan Puchai Na Ya*", which is also the title of the film, meaning "I am a man" in a rather ironic sense in Thai, Mod reveals his "private" identity to the spectator, the identity that he has constructed through the reflections in the mirror in a previous series of shots. It is now that we

62 In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey argues that in Hollywood films the image of woman has been an object of the male gaze and the spectator is supposed to identify with the male protagonist in the narrative and also with his objectification of the female image.





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begin to understand that his early images were an act or performance that Mod put on in order to pass as a "masculine" male in public. He is still saying "I am a man" but the meaning is not the same in Thai, as "*Na ya*" is used mostly as a polite feminine ending to sentences, or is sometimes used by *katoey* to describe him/erself, or otherwise used as a code –*puchai na ya* – to describe someone as gay; therefore "a man" in this sense has become a parodic version of "a man" as uttered in a public space.

For me, the above scene clearly establishes the boundary between the outside world and the private space, which is now beginning to form itself as a fantasy space. The boundary has also been heightened through the use of costumes to create a fantasy atmosphere. The strangely stylish costumes, the highly theatrical interior décor and the absurd manners and gestures of people in the space heighten the degree of 'abnormality' sharply contrasting with the outside world and enhancing the degree of performance that underlies the party (Figure 10). The costume party also positions and functions itself as a temporary space for these characters to explore their own desire and make the spectator realise the possibility of norms failing in their function within the ideology. On another level, the costume party also functions as a fantasy space for gays and lesbians beyond the filmic characters, as they are able to see very rare images and marginal spaces outside the mainstream.

The outside world, which for the most part has been "absent" and "unseen", still functions as the authority aiming to put this deviant fantasy space under scrutiny. The only contact with and threat from the outside world come when the doorbell or the telephone ring as they make the spectator aware of the existence of the outside world where heterosexual ideology is dominant. Every time





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the doorbell rings, the behaviour inside the house suddenly changes and the characters' attempt to transform themselves according to the heterosexual norms dictating the behaviour of masculine men. The flamboyant costumes that mark their feminine appearance and gestures have to be re-appropriated. Dang takes off his accessories while Nat, in a classical Thai female dress, attempts to take off his top and make it more manly, and Mod says in a masculine-manner, "I hope everybody is ready (*na krab*)" by using the male pronoun and ending. Instead of the *na ya* Mod uttered earlier, he changes it to, an ending used only by men. By imitation, mimicking, or performing the role of heterosexual men, demonstrated by Mod and his friends, the nature of all identities that have been taken for granted has been disrupted and challenged by the notion of "performance" underlying each identity, which we can see only within this fantasy world.





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CROSSING THE BOUNDARY

I would like to point out that throughout the film there is one character who does not attempt to change his image or behaviour, whether in the public or private space: Em, a drag queen. We see Em, at the beginning of the film, in a female costume as she catches her favourite boy having sex with a "real" woman, and the boy finally leaves her for the "real" woman. At one point, while he urges his friends to change their performance to that of masculine men, Em says to Mod, "Don't try to change my feminine nature". In her party costume of a beauty queen with a tiara – the image of the most ideal woman – Em does believe herself to be a "natural" woman and therefore cannot transform herself into a masculine man. She lives as a woman, by wearing women's clothes and having what she calls a 'husband'. But without the body of a woman, she can only be a 'second' type of woman (sao-praphet-song), and her appearance only serves to reinforce the heterosexual ideology, as demonstrated in the following dialogues (Figure 11):

Em: "My husband already has a wife, how dare you!"

The "real" woman: "Choke, tell me, who will you choose between the "real"(khong-jing) one and the "fake"(khong-plome) one?"

Choke: "I will have to choose the "real" woman. It's only natural."

Although what is "real" here is already a questionable term, as we have seen throughout the film, Judith Butler, through the film *Paris Is Burning* (1991) by Jennie Livingston, has taken the term





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further.⁶³ She suggests that "realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalised effect" and "this effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms."⁶⁴ However, it is important to note that "realness" for Thais is still very much dependent upon the original biological sex. As for the Thai sex/gender system, unlike in the West, the three distinct domains of biological sex, gender, and sexual preference are not clearly separated.⁶⁵ The terms *pu-chai/pu-ying* and *chai/ying*, which generally refer to biological sex, are commonly used as parts of terms to denote different English terms signifying man/woman, male/female, and masculine/feminine, which the Thai language tends to naturalise, reducing gender and sexuality to biological sex. Therefore it is rather difficult for a *katoey* to be placed in the Thai sex/gender system except as being a 'bad' copy of a 'natural' woman, as seen in the other term, *sao-praphet-song* ("second type of woman").

Katoey, as a second type of woman, is still placed on the same receiving end as *pu-ying*, subordinated to and made to suffer by 'him' in a hostile manner, as a punishment for not being 'real'. The *katoey* is also considered 'less of a man' and offensive to the notion of manhood, as the 'body' of a man being presented in public has been 'mistreated'. As demonstrated in the case of Em, she is often hurt, physically and mentally, by a man, a heterosexual man, as I interpreted, as a way of punishing those who bring shame to their manhood. After Choke leaves her, she is beaten and intimidated by, we assume, a heterosexual man, Un, because of her excessively feminine behaviour. A further good

63 *Paris Is Burning* is a documentary centred on drag balls and their preparation by Latino and African-American gay men, transvestites and transsexuals.

64 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 129.

65 Peter Jackson, *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand*. Bangkok: Bualuang Books. 1995. p. 217.





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example appears in another film, *The Last Song* (*Pleng Sud Tai, Pisan Akraseranee*, 1986), showing a more sympathetic portrayal of the life of the *katoey*. In its big-hit theme song with the same title as the film, the famous lyrics, still popular among transvestites across the country, go as follows:

...It is true that myself is a fake
 Nobody will be sincere with me
 Why blame "him"
 It is me who is in the wrong
 Even though my body is a fake
 I won't be unfaithful to myself
 I can give you my life, the only last thing I have left
 What I have to hold on
 I want "him" to know that it's hurt
 Someone please answer me, what have I done wrong?...■

Being a *katoey* is considered to result their *karma*, and by not being born having a *pu-ying* body, it is their fate to suffer. A *katoey*, who cannot 'pass' as a woman because the body being displayed in public is 'marked', would not be chosen by a man despite his desire to be in the forbidden space of a strictly heterosexual family. Em cannot bear a child, which is an important role for a woman within a traditional Thai family to ensure the continuation of the family line. Being a *katoey*, it is unthinkable for her to be reunited with her family, or to build a new one.

Unlike the *katoey* whom we can identify by their public appearance, Thai gay men are largely invisible as long as they do not explicitly identify themselves in public. Moreover, Thai "male"

66 The song was written and sung for the film by Suda Chuanban in 1986. In the film, the song is lip-synched by Somying Daorai, the main character of *The Last Song*, at the end of the film, when she finally kill herself as a result of her unfortunate love for a 'real' man.





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homosexuals attempt to distinguish themselves from the *katoey* and their feminine associations and confirm themselves belonging to the “man” category. Though if someone is to be known as gay, he would also be known as “less of a man” because he does not fit the ideological image of a Thai man – masculine, head of the family, successful marriage.⁶⁷ Large numbers of gay men have to perform their duty as a “man” by having a family and children, after which they can “pass” as “real” heterosexual men. It is a way of saving “face”, both in terms of the family and themselves.⁶⁸ It is almost unthinkable for Thai homosexuals to form their sexual identity outside the family sphere and conventional kinship roles.

While Em dares to cross the boundary, her friends prefer to keep their sexuality private and pass as heterosexual. She has to face hostility and be subordinated to a heterosexual man. She has no place in the public space which belongs exclusively to heterosexual men and women. She has to take punishment for her transgression. As her friend says to her before she leaves the house: “Be careful and do not get mocked on the street before you get home.” The street is no place for her to be, like Venus Xtravaganza in Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, in which her attempt to transgress the boundary by passing as a light-skinned woman ends tragically.⁶⁹ She belongs to the street of Patpong, where public space can turn into private space, and the dark corners of gay bars where she is free to choose any man she wants, which is the subversion of outside norms (Figure 12-13).

67 The same is probably the case with lesbians, who will be considered “inappropriate women” as they do not behave according to the traditional role of having a conventional family.

68 As I discussed earlier, Thai people worry about projecting a positive image and the way they present themselves in the society. If people outside the family find out that the son of a particular family is gay or lesbian, they will “lose face” (*sia-na*).

69 Upon her death, Phelan suggests that perhaps because she succeeded in ‘passing’ as a woman, therefore suffering the death that many other women face. (1993: p. 109)



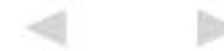


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THE STRANGER: SUBVERTING THE BOUNDARY

The ultimate threat from the outside world, besides the telephone and the doorbell ringing, comes through the character of Un. He, in a sense, has become a "stranger" who does not belong to the place and is different from others in the "community", which has its own rules and values. It is the confrontation between the two - outside/inside, known/unknown - that becomes the main conflict in the film. It is through the party in the space of Mod's house that the notion of 'heterosexual' is being interrogated. A perfect image of a heterosexual and wealthy man is depicted through Un, an old friend of Mod's, who can also be considered to wear a 'costume' as he wears a kind of a "cowboy" attire. The image of a "cowboy", often associated with excessively masculine behaviours and successful relationships with women, stands in opposition to the others at the party. However, his masculine image is contradicted by his behaviour in earlier scenes, when we learn of his failed marriage, his crying over the phone, and how he is unable to perform sexually with a woman he has met at the airport (Figure 14-15). This makes Un an even more ambiguous character, as we have already learned of the instability of his masculine appearance through Mod and his friends.

While everybody is dancing, in the belief that Taey, the birthday queen, is coming, the camera follows Un from behind as he walks in, not knowing what he is about to discover – a different world from his own (Figure 16). He crosses the boundary and once he is in this 'enclosed' space, where homosexuality becomes hegemonic, the heterosexual code he brought with him – for instance, the cowboy costume and masculine manners – has become ambiguous and taken on a different meaning, a rather homoerotic one, in the party. From the very first moment he arrives at the party, he becomes the object of the "gaze" and the object of desire among Mod's friends. He has





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been greeted by the masculine manners displayed by Mod and his friends (Figure 17). Un does not realise that he comes under observation and that every single expression of his masculine behaviour is under scrutiny; as a new member of the society, he will have to be examined. It is a reversal from the hegemonic Thai society that attempts to place homosexuals under close surveillance and make them the Other in the society.

Moreover, as a stranger he is 'undecidable', 'unclassifiable' and he refuses to remain confined to any particular space.⁷⁰ He stands between the inside and the outside, unable to locate himself in a specific place and be constructed as a permanent Other. The reason he comes to Bangkok is left vague. His past, which is told by Mod, also leaves the feeling of ambiguity towards his sexuality, as in one intimate scene between him and his friend, in which he refuses to have any kind of sexual relationship with a man (Figure 18). He does not belong to any space, and is in a way placeless, since he has decided to leave his home but does not belong in the one he finds himself in now. Towards the end, the spectator is still left unclear as to his background and identity. The fact of his being a stranger creates several problems among the people in the party, and between Un and people in the party, the conflict within Un himself, and the conflict in the mind of spectator towards his sexuality. Though heterosexual spectators may be compelled to identify with him through his image, they gradually presume an ambiguous and questionable position.

Towards the end, Taey says to Un, "Go back where you belong, this place is not for you." Un then assumes his identity as a heterosexual man by deciding to go back to his wife, though the

70 Madan Sarup. *Identity. Culture and the Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1996. p. 10.





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heterosexual ideology is already in question and unstable. By choosing to go back to his wife, we presume that he is a heterosexual man, while on the other hand, by choosing to go back to his wife, he could 'pass' as a heterosexual man. Whether he 'passes' or is, it suggests a potential which Phelan regards as "a potential performative space in which the binary is broken down."⁷¹

The film ends with the camera tracking back from inside the gate, as Mod and Nat leave in the car, until the camera stops outside while a woman in a glamorous red dress closes the gate. Then the camera cranes until we see the house in an extreme long shot from an outside viewpoint. The haunting image of woman still needs to be kept inside the private space of the house. Only the man who can conform to heterosexual ideology is allowed to be out in public.

Apart from being seen on its own terms, then, *I am a Man* should also be seen in conjunction with the way Thai society in the 1980s, particularly in Bangkok, has organised itself around homosexuality. It is less in the way the film reflects the society of the 1980s than in the way this film stands for the way in which gays and lesbians were understood in the 1980s. As M.L. Bhandevanop once summed it up in an interview: "Once an interviewer asked me whether I'm gay or not, and I told her to go back and ask her parents first what sexual position they were adopted last night." At one level, it demonstrates Thai attitudes towards sexuality as being a "private" matter, not something to be discussed in public. On another level, he did point to a close relationship between homosexuality and sexual activities. When Thai people discuss homosexuality, it is more in terms of sexual activities than about gender itself.

71 Pezev Phelan. *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge. 1993. p. 97.





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FROM DARKNESS TOWARDS THE PUBLIC EYES

The issue of homosexuality became of direct public concern in the mid-1980s, at the time of the spread of the AIDS epidemic throughout Thailand.⁷² However, it was not the first time that Thai people had become aware of homosexuality, and there had occasionally been negative reports in the media linking homosexuality with crime. Homosexuality has always been the first target of attack by the public for being the 'cause' of the things that have gone wrong in the society, and so it happened when the first few victims of AIDS in Thailand were men associated with same-sex activities⁷³. There were suggestions from various groups: for instance, the medical association of Chulalongkorn Hospital proposed that the government close down all gay bars in the Patpong and Pattaya areas; the MP Akom Sorrasuchart suggested that the government should have a policy to prevent actors and actresses who were 'sexually deviant' from appearing on television.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, there was still no policy or law against homosexuality in Thailand. A few years later, when knowledge about AIDS had become more widespread among Thai people, and the high percentage of heterosexual AIDS patients were the main focus, homosexuality was out of the public concern, though it did not totally disappear from the glare of the media, which continued carrying rather negative reports about homosexuality. At the time, the homosexual issue was predominantly linked to medical matters and only a few homosexual celebrities managed to come forward and speak for homosexuals, among them Dr. Seri Wongmontha, Pan Boon-nak.

72 Peter Jackson, *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand*, Bangkok: Bua Luang Books, 1995, p. 282.

73 The first patient found in Thailand in 1984 was a twenty-year old male who during his education in America had had sexual experience with gay men.

74 Anusorn Boonchit and Tiranan Anawat. *AIDS: The End of Gay Love*. Bangkok: The Development Society. 1986. pp. 117-127.





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In the last few years, homosexuality has become increasingly visible in terms of its representation and public discourses around the issue. In the rest of the chapter, I would like to look at some specific strategies, namely: street parades, film festivals, and demonstrations by various groups of people that made possible the growing visibility of homosexuality and an unprecedented resistance to the hegemonic-ideology. I am particularly concerned with the way in which these strategies have helped homosexuals to organise and construct themselves in Thai society, particularly in urban landscapes. But first of all, in an attempt to understand the presence of homosexuals in Thai society, I was tempted to get closer to their life in the city.





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BLUE JOURNEY

A decade after *I am a Man*, homosexual identity has been under constant transformation and increasingly visible in the society. Although the transformation is most obvious through the growing number of commercial gay spaces around the city of Bangkok, their representation is rarely seen. I chose to work in a documentary form to locate Thai homosexuals and search through the invisible layers of Bangkok that may never have been seen publicly. I chose to represent it from my own point of view, in an attempt to move away from the general view of Thai homosexuality as represented in the media. It is also a way of linking my own experience to the subject of my research and the city of Bangkok. I felt it was important to question my own identity and how my family has influenced the choices I have made in my life, which is a very important aspect of Thai society that I want to put across. I am aware of the reality that has been selected and framed by the nature of film. As Trinh T. Minh-ha also observes in relation to the 'reality' being presented in a documentary, "there is no such thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques."⁷⁵ However, it is a form that is associated with a search for the 'truth', if one exists, in the same way that these people search for their own space/place in the society, whether or not a 'real' self exists.

Moving on from *I am a Man*, which demonstrates the operation of the binary opposition of space, public and private, with a glimpse into an attempt to blur the boundary, *Blue Journey* shows how the two spaces can be negotiated depending on the roles or activities that are undertaken. The film is constructed around four different people: James, Ta, Mount and Wee, each with his/her

75 Trinh T. Minh-ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, gender and cultural politics*. London: Routledge. 1991. p. 29.





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own strategies for negotiating the spaces. Clearly, the space of the family, which is considered a private space, plays a significant role in each life and in the construction of their identities. James has defined himself, as he and his boyfriend try to make a 'home' for themselves, as also seen in their attempt to build a life together through their bakery, 'Sweet House'. Ta, who still lives with his family, is planning his future that will include his parents. Though there is no real sign of the family in Mount's case, she regards the new home she bought in Pattaya, a few hours away from Bangkok, as her refuge, where she will bring whomever she wishes to have sexual relationship with at the weekends. Wee is also part of the big family of a cabaret show, where a mother figure whom many called 'Mama' is the head of the family. Mount has cut herself off from her own family because of the shame she fears she might bring on them, particularly on her father who holds a significant post in the town. Berry argues that, as seen in many films in the West, homosexuals tend to oppose the blood family in constructing their identities, which very much depend on the notion of 'coming out', and the 'out gay' figures in films have tended to be seen without a blood family, a traditional family, or excluded from participation in the family.⁷⁶ This may not hold true in *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1991), in which many characters resolve their identity issues within the 'houses'. Though the family space still remains the centrepiece in the Asian homosexual construction of identity, as seen in many of the films of Asian Queer Cinema, including *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1993), the main issues revolve around how to reconcile gay identity within the Confucian family, or in Tsai Ming-Liang's films, as I suggested in the previous section, despite the seemingly dysfunctional family, the main characters are still overwhelmed by the family.

76 Chris Berry. *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topologies of Desire*. Australia: EmPress Publishing. 1994. p. 97.





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Each of the characters in *Blue Journey* has attempted to redefine the space of the family on their own terms, a space that is no longer fixed within traditional meanings or structures. It is the space of family, of home, that triggered the making of this film and also allowed me to explore further into my subsequent works, including *Home Movie* (2002), *Feel It Like Home* (2003-2004), and *Are You Local* (2004). In *Blue Journey*, the private space is not only constructed within the space of the family but also in other spaces where they felt secure enough to be able to express their sexuality, such as Ta in a gay discotheque, Mao on the tennis court where, as a tomboy, she is confident enough to portray her masculine nature within the tennis court, where many female colleagues enjoy her company and treat her like a man, or Wee in the cabaret show where she can be as beautiful as she hopes to be, or even James in high school where he enjoys being admired by some young male students.

The public space can turn into a private space, and through *kalatesa* they can change back and forth in the blink of an eye. Their public and private spaces are no longer spatially bounded as discussed earlier. In the group discussion by the beach, Anjaree members have turned the public space into a private one as they discuss their private lives. But as one of the members asks the group to lower their voices so as not to disturb the others the private space have once again turned into a public one. Although much to Mount's disagreement as she insists they should continue their conversation in the same mode. The self is constructed through the interplay of the two in a way that has created a different self from that of the past. As Mount also points out from the discussion within the Anjaree group, each person needs to have a personal strategy or mechanism to protect him/herself from social criticism. It is, yet again, a contradictory scene, a feature that has long been part of Thai life, not just that of homosexuals but in general, where *kalatesa* and the culture of 'saving face'



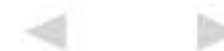


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place demands on individuals. In the following section, I look at different strategies employed by both the authorities and homosexuals.





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THE RAJABHAT BAN

The announcement by Rajabhat Teachers College, in December 1996, to ban gays and lesbians from enrolling on courses leading to degrees in kindergarten and primary school teaching came as a surprise after a long absence of any serious public concern. It was a series of sensational reports on the murder of a lesbian by her gay friend, who was a student at Chiang Mai University, that brought Rajabhat to consider this new policy.⁷⁷ The reports implicitly linked the murderer's cruelty with homosexuality, and Rajabhat administrators, led by the Minister of Education, Sukkavit Rangsitpol, later cited the case as an example of the potential dangers of giving "emotionally-unstable" and "violence-prone" people with "sexual deviations" direct and easy access to children if they became teachers.⁷⁸ Once again, it brought enormous public concern to the issue of homosexuality.

It polarised the public and the media into the two sides of a debate. Those who supported the ban, including 36 campuses across the country, argued that, as 'sexual deviants', homosexuals would be bad "role models" for children, while the opposite side claimed that the policy violated human rights principles and deprived homosexuals of equal opportunities in education. The opposition comprised various human rights groups, including the working group for women's rights, the Anjaree group ("women love women" – *ying rak ying*), The Women's Foundation, Women's Home Empower, the Union for Civil Liberties, and lecturers mainly from Mahidol University.

It was the first time that a homosexual organisation, specifically a lesbian organisation, Anjaree, made an impact on society with political objectives and brought the debate out of the silence into

77 "Children will Suffer from Rajabhat Ban", in the Education Section, *Bangkok Post*, January 23, 1997, p. 2.

78 Kulcharee Tansubhanol. "Where Homosexuals Fear to Tread". in the Outlook Section. *Bangkok Post*. January 20. 1997.





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a public arena.⁷⁹ However, the participation of male gay organisations was not as strong. There is a lack both in terms of a gay movement as a political force with objectives for social change and in terms of 'community'. Nevertheless, there have been some short-lived organisations such as the Gay Entrepreneurs Association of Thailand (GEAT) and White Line (*Sen-Si-Kao*), which became active when gays were the main target of AIDS-related attacks, and faded away at the beginning of the 1990s. Lesbians, on the other hand, feel more strongly the need to come together as a group or community since they have to face more violence on the part of patriarchal society, as a result of their refusal to submit to the authority of men. For instance, some of them have been raped by members of their family in an attempt to convert them to heterosexuality.

The debate, more than ever before, brought to the fore the concerns and diversity of views around homosexuality on the part of different groups of people in the society, as the debate was raised the notion that all people should associate, not just a small group of people interested in AIDS issue. The debate is not dissimilar from the one in the 1980s, when the media attempted to make a connection between AIDS and homosexuality. At that time, psychologists carried considerable weight in the society and most of them were concerned with homosexuality as pathology and with the 'causes' of homosexuality: for instance, family, financial problems, environment, factors which some do still believe in. Such points of view still remain among some Thai people, and within these discourses homosexuality is conflated with 'wrong' behaviours that need to be 'corrected'. The preoccupation with these ideas has put homosexuals in the position of the deviant 'Other' that needs to be repressed in the society. Here are some arguments that have been used by those who

79 Anjaree was formed twelve years ago, at a time when gay men in Thailand were beginning to gain wider public approval. Anjaree today has 500 members nationwide and publishes a bimonthly Thai-language newsletter





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support the ban:

"We are agreed with Rajabhat because we need to protect the society from the spread of these deviant people. If we do not repress them, our country will be full of people with sexual deviations, which would ultimately weaken our society as a whole."⁸⁰

Editorial, Thai Rath Newspaper

"I will not lift the ban on gays for teaching jobs. How can we change it for only "a few people"? They [human rights groups] should think about the future of young people, not simply cite human rights violations as reasons to demand the lifting of the ban. I will put them in a special school for only deviant people as they are to be considered "sick" people."⁸¹

Education Minister Sukavich Rangsitpol

These are discourses that frame homosexuality as pathology and the homosexual as a social problem, just as if they were criminals or mental patients who need to be 'contained' if not 'eliminated' from the society. The expression of such points of view and the strong defence of these beliefs represent an extreme in Thai society, as Thai people prefer to adopt an attitude of compromise when dealing with these types of situation. By and large, different viewpoints simultaneously call for a better understanding of homosexuals and the expression of pity at their unavoidable and unchangeable fate. However, indirectly the Rajabhat issue has brought these feelings more strongly to the forefront because of the concerns around the traditional Thai family. Most of the arguments

80 Editorial Section, Thai Rath Newspaper, January 25, 1997.

81 Daily News Newspaper, January 28, 1997.





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raised by Rajabhat were supported largely as a result of people claiming they were concerned that children might imitate their teachers' 'misbehaviour'. They were backed by polls showing that a very high-percentage of parents did not want their children to study 'sexually deviant' teachers. This is because the strictly heterosexual ideology of the family has been threatened by the idea that children, who will carry forward the family line, will eventually become homosexual and discontinue the lineage as a result of the effect of homosexual teachers. The following discourse was framed by the misunderstanding that homosexuality could result from imitation, and blames homosexuals for not displaying the 'correct' behaviours.

"It's not discrimination. It's okay for homosexuals to work in other fields. But not as teachers because they are dealing with kids. They usually adopt teachers as "role models". It is worrying to allow children to receive a **bad influence** from teachers with an improper sexual conduct... They are too young to differentiate between good and bad."

Assistant Professor Prangsri Panichajakul, president of the Rajabhat Institute's Suan Sunandha campus

"We will not take sexually deviant people into our teacher training faculty, particularly into the courses which prepare them to teach kindergarten and primary school pupils. Their **deviant behaviours** will have some **negative impact** on the pupils."

Assistant Professor Siroj Polpanthin, rector of Rajabhat Institute's Suan Dusit campus

82 Kulcharee Tansubhapol, "Where homosexuals fear to tread", Outlook Section, *Bangkok Post*, January 20, 1997.

83 Sirikul Bunnag and Amma Santimatanedol. Education Section. *Bangkok Post*. January 1, 1997.





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On the other hand, the opposition to the ban brought in academics from Mahidol University and several human rights organisations as a strategy to carry more weight in their debate, as Thai people respect academics and tend to believe what they say as a fact. In this way, the opposition tried to avoid a direct confrontation with the society, and by using the human rights issue they got away from having to face the society with the labels "gay" or "lesbian". Instead of a big demonstration to publicly confront the society, they chose to submit a protest letter to the Education Minister and urge international human rights organisations to put pressure on the government to take action. Here are some of the debates attempting to frame the discourse in terms of human rights:

"The policy is obsolete and against democratic and human right principles... Although they are sexually deviant, they should have the same right to education as other people. Taking them in is better than leaving them out, for it could lead to social problems."⁸⁴

Anchana Suwannanond, Anjaree's representative

"Discrimination against gays is not only a violation of human rights but also a way of sowing hatred among people in society."⁸⁵

Krittaya Arjvanichkul, a social science lecturer at Mahidol University

However, it was still a matter of confusion for most people, including the media, to think of

84 Sirikul Bunnag, "Human Rights Groups to Fight Ban on Gays", Education Section, *Bangkok Post*, January 20, 1997.

85 *ibid.*





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homosexuals as only "Tom" (tomboy), "Tut" (from "Tootsie" – a degraded name for *katoey*), because of their obvious behaviour in public. As the public for the first time began to realise that there are homosexuals who are not transvestites or effeminate men, or butch "tom" lesbians who act like men, questions then arose as to how the Rajabhat Institute could tell who was homosexual and who was not, since there were "Dees" (the "Tom's" feminine partner) or Toms who acted like ordinary women, and gays who acted straight. The Institute attempted to find answers to these questions by assuming that they would be able to detect signs of homosexuality from the psychology tests and interviews, thus enabling them to screen out gays and lesbians at an early stage.

Finally, almost a year later, the ban was lifted in September 1997, prompting a few headlines in the news, after a cabinet reshuffle and the appointment of a new Minister of Education, but not before there had been considerable public debate and a flurry of activity in the local Thai and English-language press. The new Education Minister, Chiangchai Mongkoltham, referred to the ban as having been based on the misunderstanding that students would regard homosexual teachers as role models,⁸⁶ though the Institute simultaneously proposed a new rule to keep out what it described as 'sexually abnormal' people. As one of the members of Rajabhat Council, Wanlop Piyamonotham, explained: "the Institute misunderstood and used the wrong word. That's why it seems to violate human rights. The best way is to single out sexually abnormal people."⁸⁷ To screen "sexually abnormal" people, applicants would be required to take a test. The test was not final: the result of an interview would also be taken into consideration.

86 Sirikul Bunnag, Education Section, *Bangkok Post*, September 3, 1997.

87 Sirikul Bunnag, "College Lifts its Ban on Gay Entrants", Education Section, *Bangkok Post*, September 11, 1997.





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Rajabhat did change their regulations and removed the term 'homosexuality' from their examples under the 'sexual deviant' category, employing the term 'sexually abnormal', which targets both heterosexuals and homosexuals, though it would be difficult to change Rajabhat prejudice and discrimination. In some sense it helped to move homosexuality beyond pathology. This was also well demonstrated in the debate around the issue of Thai people being more concerned with the "correct behaviour" in public than with what they really are in the private lives. As long as "gays" or "lesbians" can present themselves in public as "straight", there can be tolerance in the society. Nevertheless, the debate has moved the homosexual issue into public discourses where labels such as "tut", "tom", "dee", "gay", and "lesbian" were being claimed, clarified and contested in the public space of the media instead of in the dark corners of Bangkok streets where the invisible punishment can be violence. As Anjana said in the first public conference on lesbian rights, a few months after Rajabhat had lifted its ban, "the time is ripe for us to reveal ourselves to society."⁸⁸

88 Jennifer Bliss. "Major Boost for Lesbian Rights". *Pink Ink*. Vol. 1. No. 4. Januarv. 1998.





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ALTERNATIVE LOVE FILM FESTIVAL

Without any written laws, the tolerance of people in the society may be withdrawn at any time, as was again demonstrated during a three-day event – *Alternative Love Film Festival* (gay and lesbian film festival) – in October 1998. While the Rajabhat's opposition challenged the outdated medicalised and pathologising model of homosexuality that had dominated Thai society since the late 1960s and attempted to claim the same rights as those of heterosexuals in everyday life, *Alternative Love Film Festival* took a step further by attempting to fill the gap between reality in everyday life and modes of representation. While it is acceptable to have an established site for the ever-growing gay venues in Patpong and nearby areas, it is still unlikely for Thai people, and particularly the authorities, to accept gay and lesbian representation away from the stereotypical, or to challenge heterosexual norms. *Alternative Love Film Festival*, in a way, has stood out as the model where we can see the power of the hegemonic heterosexual ideology at work and an attempt by the authorities to eliminate what does not conform to the norms. It is also a kind of 'fantasy' space in which the 'deviant' Other claimed the public space and became a hegemonic ideology.

The result would have been rather different if the festival had been organised by a particular gay or lesbian organisation and attempted to open to the public: it would have been forced to occupy a more private space on a Patpong corner. The fact that it being organised by some university academics and including an academic forum within the festival was made it more acceptable for the general public. Nevertheless, gays and lesbians have not been made very welcome by the dominant Thai academia, which has long been the authority on what knowledge is appropriate or inappropriate for Thai society. Following a press release in September publicising the festival





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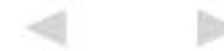
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under the Department of Motion Pictures and Still Photography, Chulalongkorn University, the head of department, Patamavadee Charuworn denied that the department had anything to do with its homosexual theme, which would give the university a bad reputation. The head of department, who was also a member of the Censorship Board, had told the police and the Censorship Board that there would be 'immoral' films shown at the festival. "Immoral" is one of the categories indicating the nature of images to be screened out by the film Censorship Board, including, for instance, love scenes and, obviously, in this case homosexuality. Homosexuality has now stepped away from being an 'illness' but instead has been branded 'immoral', apparently destroying a good Thai traditional values.

Under the current law, it is illegal to show any 'immoral' films, such as those containing pornography, in public venues. Therefore it was illegal for the festival, with its link to an 'immoral' theme, according to Patamavadee, to show any films in public without having the films screened by the Censorship Board first. To avoid having parts of its films screened out, or whole films banned, the festival was finally held under the alternative title *Film Lover Group*, so as to turn the festival into a private event that allowed members only to view the films. In the end, the festival was forced out of the academic circle and remained contained within a private space. Although the 'private' is no longer a space filled with sorrow or self-hatred, it is now one that can open and extend into the 'public' space.

With a big sign indicating "Membership Only", in the private space of a makeshift theatre at the Saeng Aroon Arts Centre, large crowds were drawn to the festival. Despite attempts by the authorities to have it stopped, the opening night was a full house. Some minutes after the first film had started





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showing, the local police interrupted the screening with a court order which stated that a complaint had been received to the effect that a group of people were showing 'immoral films'. After making a statement in front of the audience that he was curious of what kind of films were showing, he police left the theatre satisfied that nothing immoral or illegal was taking place. It was a rare moment that the authority has become a minority and was forced to be at the centre of attention for all the 'gaze' of the other to make a thorough investigation. Although he left the theatre in a rush afterwards, undercover police, including a contingent from the Film Censorship Office, remained at the venue. The police force, which had been deployed as an ultimate threat to confront those who broke the law now became symbolic of an authority that had failed to maintain the established norms. The remaining police officers were no longer concerned with the 'immoral' theme but rather with saving the 'face' of the heterosexual ideology and retaining its territory in the public sphere, which had been disrupted by homosexuality.

Located on Silom road, at the temporary theatre, the festival turned out to be a contested site and somehow managed to function as a fantasy site in the society. Aware of the fact that coming to the festival might in some way be against the law and the authorities, and aware that they were exposing themselves to the public gaze and ultimately to the media, despite the sign indicating "private space", both gays and lesbians, film critics, film lovers, and some curious heterosexuals were drawn to the place. The sign is posted in a similar manner as the sign "private property" in front of Soi 2 but in a different context. The "private property" is no longer a space of secrecy or a closet space. Although it would still be inappropriate to call it a 'community' as the festival was structured out of the temporary in both time and space, but the short-lived character of the festival





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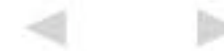
nevertheless provided a temporary space for a safe 'coming out' and the opportunity for people to come to terms with their homosexuality in a semi-public space. It is a kind of space that at once 'real' and 'imagine'. It is a kind of test site that brought the invisible layers of Bangkok that



**Re-Reading The Katoey's body****THE BODY:****RE-READING THE KATOEY BODY**

Having, over the previous two years, knocked out 18 of his 22 opponents in Chiang Mai, his hometown province in northern Thailand, 16-year-old Parinya Kiatbutsaba, known as Nong Tum (or sister Tum) or *nak muay na-ya* (*boxer na-ya*), had made his way through to the Lumpini Stadium, the famous national boxing ring, in February 1998. What was supposed to be an ordinary fight between two men in the age-old national sport of Muay Thai had turned into a rather significant event when Parinya stepped out into the ring with full make-up, painted nails and a hair band. His appearance identified him with those outside the norm or, more specifically, with what Thai people know as a *katoey* – a term that often refers to someone who is biologically male but who exhibits varying degrees of feminine behaviour, ranging from effeminacy to a sex-change operation – and caused a big stir among the packed hetero-dominant audience as well as in the sacred masculine world of Muay Thai, – regarded as the game of a real man in which “masculinity” is displayed, contested and eventually sustained.⁸⁹ The strange mixture that collapsed both the terms “masculinity” and “femininity” into the same body had unsettled the once exclusively masculine space of boxing ring. It also brought to our attention questions around our knowledge of the body in relation to identity, in this case sexual identity.

89 According to the Royal Institute Dictionary (2000), a *katoey* is a person who has the genitals of both sexes or a person who has mentality or behaviours of the opposite sex. It can also mean a seedless fruit. However, in common parlance, it is a traditional term referring to both men and women who exhibit cross-dressing, though nowadays it is often applied only to males who exhibit varying degrees of feminine behaviours, ranging from effeminacy to undergoing a sex-change operation, and occasionally used to refer to male homosexuals in general. According to medical notes, there are two different kind of *katoeys*: firstly, *katoey tae* (“true hermaphrodite”), a person born with both genitals, a condition that could be corrected by an operation; and secondly, *katoey tiam* (“false hermaphrodite”), born with different genitals internally and externally.

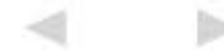




Re-Reading The Katoey's body

Using the Parinya event as the starting point of my inquiry, I wish to point out the way in which Parinya's body, and *katoeys* in general, have exposed, and transgressed, the loosely-drawn boundary in Thai society between heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine, men/women/, public/private, hegemony/minority, etc, as well as exposing the 'other' beyond the two sides of the binary. The body has become, in a way, a strategic means of allowing *katoeys* to situate themselves in a society where the binary sex/gender is predominant, and at the same time to be able to critique it from within. What I am proposing here is that the body has become a site of more than just the sexed body or the 'natural' body that underpinning hetero-ideology, a site that now engages in alternative forms of thinking; in this case, thinking through body. This chapter will thus attempt to unveil some of the complex relationships that construct one's knowledge of society and of oneself.

By taking not only the example of Parinya's body, but also by a general reading of the body of the *katoey*, we can begin to see the different ideologies that have been played out, battling and compromising, upon the body. With this in mind, my task is centered on the attempt to re-code and at the same time recover/reassert the body of the *katoey* from the ignored and missing parts of a history that has generally relied on the over-dominant discourse of heterosexual ideology. What I am particularly interested in is the way in which the *katoey*'s body has been located and understood through different periods, how this may have changed under different power regimes, and Western influences. This includes the recent globalisation of the queer process, where the notion of 'gay' and 'lesbian' becomes prominent in regard to homosexual discourse. My main argument is that the biological body that has long been used as a significant mechanism of heterosexual ideology





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by imposing the idea of a compulsory binary opposition of sex/gender and the construction of our knowledge of sex/gender, has become increasingly unsettled through, for instance, Parinya's appearance in the boxing ring, or by what Judith Butler proposes in *Gender Trouble*, where she refers to 'a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction', at the same time highlighting the constructed nature of heterosexuality.⁹⁰ The body, then, when involved in certain acts, can also become a means through which a minoritarian subject counters the hegemonic ideology.

Several questions inform the discussion. Has the body in a Thai context been used to construct an identity and sex/gender system, in general, in the same way as the dominant discourse from the West? What does it mean to be embodied as a *katoey* today? How does it differ from what is known in the West as 'drag' or 'transvestite'? If the *katoey* body, and homosexuality in general, can be seen as a kind of closet, how is it similar or different from the closet that operates in the West? How have their bodies been used in order to transgress the boundary of hegemonic heterosexual ideology in the public space, in an attempt to provide an alternative means for *katoeys* and other minority groups who have occupied a rather marginal space in society and have been virtually invisible in any mode of representation, to be able to emerge within the dominant culture and yet at the same time work against it from within? My central question is: in terms of their bodies, is it possible to perceive them as an alternative third body (third sex/gender) outside of the compulsory opposition of man/woman that features prominently in the West?

90 Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge. 1990. p. 138.





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In order to help iterate my methodology, I wish to look at the possibility of thinking of the body as a space that has already been established. A number of researchers have explored the way in which the body has been thought of as a kind of geography. Among them are Elizabeth Grosz: *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), and Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993). Both see the body as a constantly reworked surface of inscription and resist the idea of dualism that governs much of the work of feminist theorists regarding the body. The body as a geographical site has been inscribed and marked with differences in terms of gender, sexuality, race, age, and so on. It has become a source of knowledge that provides a significant key to understanding the social arrangements and power manifest in the body, as pioneered by Michel Foucault whose works, including *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), *Discipline and Punish* (1979), *History of Sexuality Vols. I & III* (1976, 1986) and *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (1980), underlie the overall research. His mechanism of thinking could be regarded as the analytical power relations which seem to problematise the political arrangements in societies. The Foucauldian mechanism also refers to 'discursive practices' which primarily function to bridge the gap between the realms of theory and practice. Adopting Foucault's mechanism of 'discursive practice' made it possible to analyse a variety of conditions in social arrangements that take place on the body in Thai society. It is through his study that one begins to look at the body in a different way and it is where my own interest began to take shape.

He explains how power circulates within the social order through discourse. A discourse, in other





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words, could be described as a set of recurring statements that function systematically in order to define cultural objects and provides the concepts and terms through which such an object can be studied and discussed.⁹¹ Through his understanding of the body in terms of discourse, he discusses it extensively, particularly in his work *Discipline and Punish*, examining the development of the disciplinary mechanism since the seventeenth century through to its use in modern society to train and regulate individuals. The crucial point in his discussion is the way in which he shows how it is through the body that discipline takes effect, and how the mechanism is employed by various institutions: prisons, hospitals, armies and schools. A body, as he stated, "is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved".⁹² Foucault writes:

...the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain "political economy" of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use "lenient" methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (1979, p. 25)

The body then becomes the site where power and the process of normalisation take place. For this research, by employing Foucault's mechanism of 'discursive practice', the body may refer to the actual place where power could be embodied and reflect the social determinations. This mechanism will

91 Dani Cavallaro, *Critical and Cultural Theory*, New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 2001, p. 90.

92 Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage. 1979. p. 198.





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provide a possibility for this research to open up the complex social arrangements at the microscopic site where the condition of social arrangements primarily emerges – the body.

What am I particularly interested in here is not only the body as a site that has been subjected to power, but more importantly the body as a site with a difference which may ultimately be excluded from the general agreement and those that 'have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to subject, neutralise, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect', which Foucault terms 'utopia' and 'heterotopia'.⁹³ While Utopia, as he suggests, is a site with no real space as it represents society in its perfection, heterotopia is absolutely real, with a site that is different from all the arrangements that they reflect. In his essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Foucault attempts to systematically explain heterotopia and locate them physically in reality such as in prisons or asylums and many other real places such as cinemas, holiday camps, brothels and so on.

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilisation, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all the other real sites that can be found in the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault, 1986, p. 24)

93 Michel Foucault. 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' in *Diacritics* 16. 1986. pp. 22-27.





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Heterotopia could emerge anywhere when people are granted the opportunity to think of their own conditions in relation to the set of norms that have directly governed their very being; for instance, the separation of spatiality between the 'normal' and 'deviant' body such as a katoey body under the condition of heterosexual determination.

In the absence of a proper history of the *katoey*, and in the attempt to locate the *katoey*, as well as homosexuals, in Thai society, Foucault's heterotopia has provided an alternative way to consider and locate what has been left out of the dominant ideology as well as history. Therefore, firstly, I would like to use the concept of heterotopia as a kind of alternative form of thinking in an attempt to understand and re-cover what could be seen as a missing body in history. Secondly, I want to re-read the *katoey* body in order to reveal the possibility of socially constructed counter-sites to Thai social orders that are embodied in the form of a *katoey* body. These are the two concepts I wish to use as a guideline throughout the following discussion. I also want to relate the discussion of the *katoey* body as heterotopia to my overall theme, *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, in terms of the way that 'heterotopia' may help to better explain *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* on a 'microscopic' level through the reading of the *katoey* body from the past to the present.

By using Foucault's heterotopia as a guide, on the one hand, the *katoey* body can be seen as a sort of effectively realised utopia, as it embodies and represents the Thai ideology of unity where the human is part of the universe/nature, derived from the age-long concept of Brahman, as well as the influence of Daoism where the idea of unity involves two very different forces, *yin* and *yang*, the ideal unity of sexes. The human body, as part of nature and of something that is more important than





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itself, is reflected through the ideological body that is often referred to in traditional Thai literature and folklore, where in the same body the human, animal, deities and other creatures can co-exist harmoniously. The body, in an ideal world, is no longer bounded by physical existence but reflects a certain ideology, an idea that is often reflected and employed by all branches of the traditional arts, whether painting, theatre, or even film.⁹⁴ The *katoey*, who embodies both man and woman, therefore, represents the non-dualist Thai ideology, in both the sense of the body that is non-fixed and the human body at its most perfect, as both *yin* and *yang* co-habiting within the same body. This ideology also points to the fundamental difference between Thai and Western modes of thinking. While the Western mode is based on dualism, with the assumption that there are two distinct and incompatible substances, each with its own sphere, in this binary usually one pole dominates the other. The Thai mode of thinking is constructed on the basis of two equal sides, like the two sides of a coin, and the idea of *yin* and *yang* where the existence of one compliments the other. The 'other' of Western philosophy has become a kind of unwanted, undesirable part, or even a leftover of what constitutes the 'self', while the 'other' in the Thai version offers a positive approach which may lead to a different kind of understanding.

On the one hand, the *katoey* body can be seen as heterotopia in the sense that it does exist in society, where it becomes the 'other' vis-à-vis the heterosexual arrangements. Unlike the body of the gay man, which has become a kind of closet or concealed space where he can hide his sexual identity while being forced to submit to heterosexual norms, the *katoey* body is not a concealment

94 Nithi Aeiwsriwong (1995) suggests that the body in traditional performances, later transposed to film, embodies the ideology, not necessarily in direct relation to the surrounding reality but instead reflecting another level of truth represented by the character as he attempts to explain the unrealistic approach towards physical appearance in the Thai performing arts, including films.





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of sexual identity, but instead the embodiment of both sexes. It is neither one nor the other. Instead of becoming a passive, fixed, and non-dialectical site, the *katoey* body becomes the kind of site that bell hooks has called of 'radical openness', no longer fixed in a dualistic way as *katoeys* attempt to move beyond the boundary of the binary and into different spaces.⁹⁵ By embodying a kind of ambivalent and in-between space, *katoeys* have become a site of creativity, their bodies a kind of playground allowing the fragments of each compulsory sexual category to be reconstructed in a way that may move us beyond the limitations of social determinations. As the 'deviant other', they have also become a site in which their bodies are a kind of testament of resistance to the existing norms of the sex/gender category.

It becomes an endlessly negotiated and renegotiated site between the dominant ideology and the minoritarian subject negotiate, which could lead to an imaginative way of discussing relationships through which minority subjects could survive and act within the dominant ideology. Therefore, *katoey* bodies, with their potential for revealing the dichotomy of the relationship between repress/oppress, power/control, and centre/periphery derived from social arrangements, become the discursive formations which allow us to engage with an alternative form of thinking with regard to social arrangements and spaces concerning the embodiment of gender.

However, Foucault's notion of heterotopia is fundamentally problematic. The way in which the *katoey* body has been directly moulded and subjugated by many different power regimes, ranging from the absolute power of kings or dictators to the modern-day bureaucratic system, has undoubtedly been

95 bell hooks. *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press. 1990. p. 152.





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contingent and involved highly specific local transformations. By deriving from Western history, the implication of heterotopia also runs the risk of falling into the trap of universalising. Consequently, it is necessary to locate this investigation within the Thai context, and I will also attempt to review the existing knowledge in relation to the subject by tracing the meanings and the importance of the body in everyday life to Buddhist beliefs, as well as the Thai construction of sex/gender, which could problematise the Western understanding of body, sex, gender and sexuality, which has long been held as the only authoritative knowledge. In both cases, I finally aim to arrive at a distinctive formation in the understanding of the *katoey* body that cannot be easily reduced to another Western reading, whilst also being aware of the global queering process.





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MATERIALIZING THE KATOHEY BODY: A MISSING BODY IN THAI HISTORY

-Buddhist Body: dialogue with the West

The disciplines of philosophy and science which have long shaped and framed the overall knowledge of the body and sex/gender in the West, and contributed significantly to knowledge in the rest of the world, in some ways take a rather different turn in Thai society, where Theravada Buddhism is the main influence in almost every aspect of life. However, it needs to be noted from the start that not all Thais are devoted practitioners and that Buddhism cannot be simply used to explain every thought and every act in the modern world, but it certainly can provide many Thais with a way of viewing the world, moral standards and a shared language.[■] What I attempt to pursue here is what may have been ignored by some scholars writing about the Thai gender system, and the way that the cultural and social differences in Thailand may have produced the different ways that body and self are understood. As there has been little or no evidence as to how Thai thinking on the body and how the body has been shaped and reshaped through different forces in Thai society, I shall attempt to consider political, social and cultural forces in order to reach a useful mode for understanding the body in relation to the construction of the sex/gender system, leading to a further understanding of the *katoey* body and its place within Thai society.

It is necessary to refer to Theravada Buddhism, which I will call simply "Buddhism" in the rest of the chapter, to be able to move towards an understanding of Thai people's beliefs about the body. However, it is important to keep in mind the various interpretations that scholars have drawn upon to support their statements. In the general understanding of Buddhism, the body is no more than an intermediate site that one temporarily inhabits in order to repay one's *karma*. It is often the

96 Penny Van Esterik. *Materialising Thailand*. Oxford: Berz. 2000. p. 66.





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case that we continue to produce *karma* until we can reach the ultimate goal in Buddhism, *nirvana*. This literally means "extinction", and the term can be interpreted in many ways: for instance, the extinction of any suffering—or the extinction of the ego (or *sangkhara*, a term that could refer to both body and mind).⁹⁷ The body, in other words, is only a vehicle for *karma* to materialise, as it is nothing in itself. At the heart of Buddhism, ideologically, there is not even a "body" that exists on its own. It is just a mixture of various elements (either in terms of gaseous chemical elements – i.e. oxygen, hydrogen, etc. – or the four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire) that can themselves be traced to the state of emptiness.⁹⁸ Therefore one should not attach to the body the concept of "self", as there is no initial "self" to be considered.

What I term the "body" above needs to be understood in the context of Buddhism, where it is distinct from the Western concept of dualism between mind and body, particularly Cartesiandualism.⁹⁹

97 Buddhadasabhikku, *Handbook of Mankind*, Bangkok: Pappim, 1989, p. 49. There have been many interpretations of Buddha's teachings over the centuries. Buddhadasabhikku has been one of the prominent monks in contemporary Thai society who have attempted to return to the fundamentals of Buddha's teachings amidst the growing interest in rituals and ceremonies rather than the practice of Buddha's actual teachings, upon which I base my arguments concerning Buddhism.

98 *ibid.*, p.39.

99 Christianity, for its part, has conventionally separated mind and body in relation to what is immortal and what is mortal, which is exemplified by the figure of Christ himself, whose soul and immortality is derived from God, while the body and mortality is human. Although it is only through Descartes, and what eventually became known as "Cartesian dualism", that ultimately the foundations of knowledge were linked to the mind/body opposition, as he believes that in order to acquire knowledge one needs to separate – if not abandon – the soul, or consciousness, from nature. The mind (soul, reason, and consciousness) is, then, thought to be more important than, and held as superior to, the body (matter, nature, and corporeality). It is this dualistic mentality that has consistently dominated Western thought throughout its history of philosophy, where there have been both the attempt to overcome as well as to justify the idea, particularly in relation to the opposition between man and woman, which has often linked men to mind and women to body.





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However, one needs to keep in mind the influence of Cartesian dualism in the natural sciences which has ended up dominating the body of knowledge in every part of the world. In Buddhism, there is mention of both terms, *chitta* ("mind") and *gaya* ("body"); however, one has never been understood as being superior to the other. The body is neither governed by the mind nor subordinated to it, as they are both equally important. While Western philosophy has reduced the body to only matter or substance that needs to be separated from the mind, Buddhist philosophy considers the body to be on the same level as the mind and maintains its significance in relation to the path of enlightenment.¹⁰⁰

In her essay "*Body and the Enlightenment*", Suwanna Satha-anan attempts to demonstrate just this as she discusses the body as both an obstacle and a vehicle to achieve enlightenment. She argues that although throughout the history of Buddhism the training and controlling of *chitta* has always been significant to the understanding of Dharma, Buddha's teaching, this does not mean that it should be separated from the training and controlling of *gaya*.¹⁰¹ The importance of controlling *gaya* has also been suggested in the different practices between laypersons and monks who need to live under a strict code of conduct in order to help them understand Dharma and ultimately achieve enlightenment. However, at the same time, the body is viewed as a great obstacle to achieving enlightenment, as Buddha himself considered that the greatest obstacle for men is women's bodies

100 The conception may not be much different from the ancient Indian religions which believed both mind and body to be equally important, and where the body played a significant part in the path to ultimate truth. However, Buddhism has gone one step further by aiming at nirvana.

101 Suwanna Satha-anan, "Guy and the Enlightenment" in *Pernrang-Prangguay*, Paritta Chalermpao-Koranantakul (ed.), Bangkok: Koofai Printing. 1998. p. 54.





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(including all senses: sound, smell, taste, and touch of the female), and vice versa in the case of women.

The body is, then, the site of desire, lust, and attachments that one needs to control and ultimately understand the ephemeral nature of. Moreover, it is what makes us fall into illusion, succumb to the temptation of the senses, and what chains us to the continual circle of karma and the bonds of *samsara*, the succession of birth and rebirth that characterises all existence.¹⁰² The negative depiction of decay and impermanence of the body in Buddha's teaching is one of the ways that help one to detach from the physical form of body. The rotten, stinking body is often a subject for the monk to meditate upon. Therefore the body or *gaya* that has been trained in detachment is perceived as the best vehicle and also the significant condition leading to the path of enlightenment. As Suwanna points out, many branches of Buddhism believe that without the human body enlightenment cannot possibly be achieved.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, it does not mean that the body is more important than the mind, as both *chitta* and *gaya* are necessary to achieve enlightenment and ultimately nirvana. This is best demonstrated in the Buddhist meditation *vipassana*, the aim of which is to attain wisdom as the first step towards achieving the ultimate Buddhist goal of *nirvana*, when both *chit* and *guy* no longer exist.¹⁰⁴ In order to practise *vipassana*, both *chit* and *guy* have to be harmoniously trained to the ultimate awareness of all things that could cause suffering and desire, and for the advanced

102 Bernard Faure, *The Red Thread: Buddhism Approaches to Sexuality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 55.

103 Suwanna Satha-anan, "Guy and the Enlightenment" in *Pernrang-Pranggay*, Paritta Chalermphao-Koranantakul (ed.), Bangkok: Kopfai Printing, 1998, p. 62.

104 As was demonstrated by the Buddha himself when he experimented with all sort of practices in order to find the ultimate truth in life, self-torture being one of the ways. He thought that neglecting and torturing the body and concentrating on the mind could bring him enlightenment. It was the "middle way" which proved to be the right path where mind and body are equally balanced.





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learner to be able to dismiss them from the outset. Whereas in Western perceptions of meditation, based on the idea of dualism, one attempts to withdraw the mind from the body and the world altogether.¹⁰⁵

By linking the split between mind/body to man/woman, it undeniably forms what has led to be the conception of patriarchy in which women have to be subordinated and oppressed by men. It is a concept that has been opposed and well documented by many radical feminists and for the past decade queer theorists in order to move beyond the binary of man/woman. Butler, among them, has taken up, Foucault in an attempt to overturn the dualism between mind and body and significantly suggest that the oppressive system, which constitutes women and homosexuals as subordinated, if not outsiders, is a socially constructed one.

The Western mode of thinking which ties women to body and men to mind and leads to patriarchal culture, I argue, may have little relevance to Thai ideology, as the body is no longer the sexed body, but the obstacle that all beings, despite their gender/sexuality, need to overcome. Gender has never been a major concern for Thais, as other categories are of equal, or in some cases of more important, concern, such as age, wealth, status and position in the social hierarchy. One's identity, such as being a man or a woman, is also believed to change each time one is reborn, according to the law of karma, unlike the Judaeo-Christian tradition where the identities of men and women are eternal.¹⁰⁶ Buddhism not only encourages people to understand the changeable and impermanent

105 Brian P. McGrath, "Bangkok Simultopia" in *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis* (eds. Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach), London: Routledge, 2002, p. 208.

106 Penny Van Esterik. *Materialising Thailand*. Oxford: Berz. 2000. p. 73.





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nature of gender, it ultimately encourages the extinguishing of gender and 'self' altogether, wherein lies the fundamental difference from the West's understanding of 'self'. This basic tenet of Buddhism provides a rather significant way to deconstruct the sex/gender structure altogether and allows for the possibility of other genders, beyond the fixed binary gender identities, to co-exist in Thai society, as I shall discuss further.





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-(BODY) SURFACES THAT MATTER: KATOEYS AS LAK-KA-PHET

Buddhism has not only provided the background for non-binary attitudes towards sex/gender and non-materialistic attitudes towards the sexed body, but it has also provided, in terms of the linguistic construction of Thai sex/gender, a rather ambiguous view of sex/gender and the various categories involved. What is known by the separate terms "sex", "gender" and "sexuality" in the West, is described in Thai society by the term *phet*, in which the boundary between the three tends to dissolve, allowing people to move in and out of each category without being confined to a particular domain. If one were to attempt to pin down these boundaries and differentiate them, it would reflect the structure of Western discourses rather than the indigenous Thai sex/gender pattern. What is more important for Thai people is not the category of *phet* but the difference between roles of each *phet*.

In a common parlance, the terms *phet chai/ phet ying* or *phet puchai/phet puying* ("man/woman" or "masculine/feminine") – biological sex or gender – can all be referred back to the biological domain, their significance underlined by the roles and duties in society, as the *phet* in Buddhism has suggested. For a person to perform a masculine or feminine role is, thus, believed to be biologically based in maleness or femaleness, while *katoeys* are believed to be biologically based in hermaphroditism.¹⁰⁷ It is possible to argue that the Thai sex/gender system is body-based, as people access their gender/sexual identity through the body. However, the blurring of the boundaries between sex/gender/sexuality and the slipperiness of the language allows people to move in and out of the categories as well as providing the space for a third sex/gender to exist, as evidently shown in the long history of the *katoeys*, who are considered neither male nor female.¹⁰⁸ From a linguistic

107 Peter Jackson, *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand*, Bangkok: Bualuang Books, 1995, p. 217.

108 Rare historical data from ancient law and





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point of view, the term *katoey* can probably be traced to the root of a pre-Angkorian Khmer verb variously represented in inscriptions as *dai* or *doej* (which could be pronounced similarly to *toey*), which meant "to be other/different".■

However, newly invented terms such as *gay*, *gay king* (sexually acting as penetrator), *gay queen* (sexually acting as receiver), *tom* (masculine-lesbian), and *dee* (feminine lesbian) have increasingly extended the meaning of *phet* towards sexuality which varies from category to category. For those with the clear identity of *chai* (man) and *ying* (woman), we should conceive of sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) as a zone of slippage that may move across these two categories without disrupting their core identities. (Jackson, 1989, p. 170). The category of *katoey* believed to be biologically based in hermaphroditism, called *katoey tae* ("real katoey"), has now extended to the realm of sexuality and is used to describe homosexual men who exhibit varying degrees of femininity.

This non-binary approach towards sex/gender can be traced back to the term *phet*, which has been used in Buddhism in a rather non-sexually related manner, but employed instead to refer to status and way of life. *Phet kha-ra-vas* (*phet* lay person) and *phet ban-pa-chit* (*phet* monk) are the two terms used to identify the separate identity of persons in a secular world and a religious world. If a person does not behave correctly according to their status in either a worldly or religious world,

religious documents mentioning various types of sex/gender, including *ubhatobyanjanaka* (referring to hermaphrodites), have proved a long history of the existence of the *katoey* as a third sex/gender. However, it would obviously take more than one chapter to discuss the history of the *katoeys*. It is not my intention here to discuss it in detail, except to offer some useful background in order to understand the modern representation of *katoeys* and their place in modern Thai society.

109 Peter Jackson. *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand*. Bangkok: Bualuang Books. 1995. p. 193.





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the term *lak-ka-phet* is used to describe them. The term was later borrowed to describe a person whose behaviour and appearance can neither be described as male nor female. In another twist, the term *lak-ka-phet* can also mean "disguise", to hide ones' true identity – for instance, a *katoey* who attempts to pass as a woman or a gay who man attempts to pass as a straight man.

While suggesting that Thais access their identity through their body, what really matters to Thais are the body surfaces that appear to the public, although the biological body has played an important part in identifying Thai gender and sexuality, due to Thai sensitivity to context or what is known as *kalatesa*, which has already been discussed. It is the changeable surfaces that allow for the flow of multiple gender/sexual identities.¹¹⁰ The gender/sexual surfaces can be perceived as temporary and non-fixed, and can be transformed in order to have a 'correct' and smooth contact with others and be accepted in society. Therefore it is important to adapt the body surfaces and behaviours according to the right *kalatesa*.

The body surfaces, therefore, have become part of the socialisation process and need to be controlled while communicating with others. This may prove a striking difference from what foreigners experience with their bodies.

Foreigners are painfully obvious on Bangkok streets as they trip off curbs, lurch into other pedestrians and bump into immovable objects. This lack of control of their bodies and lack

¹¹⁰ It is important to note that the Thai term *kalatesa* is different from the English meaning of "context", as it has often been translated into. As Penny Van Esterik writes: "It does not refer to a broad, static framing for text or practice, but to the coming together of immediate circumstances in time and space in a certain fashion." (2002. p. 40)





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of awareness of how they move through space illustrates Westerners' different orientation to their bodies. Thai appear to be much more 'in' their bodies than do Westerners, suggesting that the core Thai self is strongly embodied and effectively socialised.

(Esterik, 1999, p. 283)

Van Esterik's observations may confirm that Thai people tend to have better control of their bodies than Westerners. However, as McGrath points out, it would be a misunderstanding to identify a 'core' 'Thai self' as 'embodied' because Thai self-presentation, as he suggests, is "strongly embodied as result of highly codified, culturally constructed, embodied practices".¹¹¹ Rather than identifying a 'core', 'Thai self' as 'embodied', the two could be seen as separate. In the extreme case of monks, every step and every gesture is completely felt as a result of the practice of meditation or *vipassana*; thus, instead of realising and constructing self through the body, the practice aims at a dissolution of a self. For the rest, body control and body awareness could be seen as a significant part of a socialisation process which, unlike that of a Westerner, does not require an essentialised self-identity.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Thai society operates around the construction and representation of positive images, and it is important to conform to others' expectations and what others think of one. Therefore, maintaining the body surface (symbolically referred to as "face" or *na*, which stands for one's social image) is a necessary part of the socialisation process. If one fails to live up to others' expectations, terms such as *sie na* ("loose face") and *kai na* ("selling the face") will be

111 Brian P. McGrath, "Bangkok Simultopia" in *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis* (eds. Amy Binzaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach). London: Routledge. 2002. p. 208.





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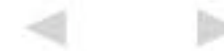
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used to describe one's failure and one would be shamed. Its significance in Thai society leads Peter Jackson to refer to it as "the culture of face and shame" (Jackson, 1995, pp. 41-42).

However, as discussed in the *What is Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd?* section, the Thai body surface or 'face' is not based on the interior or the self as in the West. In the over-determination of Buddhism, there is no 'self' and what we cling on to as who we are, whether man, woman, husband, wife, etc, is only illusory and impermanent. The Thai 'face' is, then, disconnected from what the West knows as 'self'; instead it is transformable and transitory, depending on time, locations and relationship with persons, or "*kalatesa*". McGrath argues that the Thai face "is a modern practice that dismantles Western faciality and landscapicity."¹¹² "Its strategy is not one of resistance to outside influences, nor a return to an ideal of tradition, but of multiplicity, polyvocality, and simultaneity."¹¹³ Although *kalatesa* may allow the surface not to be rigidly fixed, the term and its context must be analysed as it has laid an unspoken rule for the gender hierarchy system that permits one to have power over another in the Thai construction of sex/gender.

112 *ibid.*, p. 215.

113 *ibid.*, p. 215.





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-KALATESA: KATOEYS AND THEIRS PLACES IN THE ORGANISING OF PHET (SEX/GENDER/SEXUALITY) THROUGH SPACE AND TIME

Kalatesa can be seen as a social code of conduct or social norms of behaviour aimed at maintaining smooth relationships between individuals in Thai society; in other words, to create order in society. This has become a form of social control: it is about the wrong behaviour that must be corrected. *Tuk kalatesa* ("right *kalatesa*") and *pid kalatesa* ("wrong *kalatesa*") are adopted to explain someone's behaviour as right or wrong according to the hierarchical system of space. However, one is not obliged to follow the *kalatesa*, and may not be punished by any law; instead one will lose face and respect in society, which is considered equally important, as I suggested earlier. One is also dependent on the knowledge which identifies one's position in the hierarchical system, both in terms of places and people, and knowing where, when, and how to present and express oneself accordingly, which includes presenting and behaving oneself according to one's own gender, in order to conform to a right *kalatesa*. *Kalatesa*, therefore, has provided people with rules for ordering the surface appearance of bodies, expressed through the appropriate language, dress and manners in order to ensure a smooth relationship between hierarchies as well as with space.

The concept may resemble Foucault's notion of 'discipline', as he attempts to explain how the disciplinary mechanisms have individualised and at the same time 'normalised' each individual. By aiming to control activities according to time and space, discipline has turned into an instrument of power that can only operate and function through the body. The body has to perform according to a set of norms, in which discipline is imposed through rules and regulations, both formal and informal, examinations and its mechanisms of punishment, that range from an extreme form of violence to a





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subtle one.

...the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. (Foucault, 1979, pp. 25-26)

Like Foucault's discipline, *kalatesa* is also bounded by power that continuously exercises its force through the body. They both tie each individual to an identity. Therefore, this power, according to Foucault, "deploys discourses, particularly knowledge, on and over bodies, establishing knowledge as the representative of the truth of those bodies and their pleasures."¹¹⁴ It becomes possible to see how the body as perceived today has been constructed through discourses as demonstrated by *kalatesa*. It is a prime example of Foucault's conception of the role of the body linking 'power/knowledge'. It is through knowledge that power is able to seize hold upon the body, and in turn, it is only through the regimes of power that knowledge functions. *Kalatesa*, which has long governed our knowledge of the body, then, could be seen to be a result of varied and elaborate sources of power, i.e. religious, monarchical, and the more contemporary forms of government and its regimes, which may operate through various modes: traditions, rules, laws etc.

Although Thailand does not have a clear caste system as in India, which is based on birth groups and occupations, with the priest in the pre-eminent role, the hierarchy is a predominant part of Thai society, and *kalatesa* is set according to the power relations between and within the hierarchy.

114 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 149-150.





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At the top of the hierarchical tree are the monks (symbolically representing the religion), and the king (symbolically representing the monarchy), for whom the utmost respect by the Thai people is required, as well as conformity to the strict set of rules, a highly coded *kalatesa*, to communicate with them.¹¹⁵ Others are ranked according to various categories such as age, status, merits, wealth and occupation. Certain occupations are placed higher in the hierarchy than the rest, such as doctors and teachers, as well as the military and the police force. The hierarchy is perhaps less concerned with gender than with power, as a result of a combination of factors. As Tannenbaum suggests, many women could rank higher than men, as "for Thais gender is a secondary concern and status and power receive primary consideration".¹¹⁶ However, I would like to argue that in most cases, despite the apparent Western influence in Bangkok, gender is still the source of power where men are in a higher hierarchical position than women, although this needs to be considered in combination with other factors. It can perhaps be explained through the Thai understanding of space, where the hierarchy of things is very much bound up with the rule of *kalatesa*.¹¹⁷

As I suggested in *What is Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd?*, the Thai ideology of space can be separated into horizontal and vertical. All things, including our bodies, are categorised into different levels.

115 King Rama VI was inspired by the British trinity 'God, King and Country', which he adapted to 'Nation, Religion and King', as well as changing the flag to the tricolour flag to signify the Thai trinity.

116 Nicola Tannenbaum, 'Buddhism, Prostitution and Sex' in *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand* (eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida Cook), Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999, p. 224.

117 It needs to be noted that Thai people give much importance to space, in some cases more than to time: for example, Thai people are likely to dress according to spaces or places more than according to time. Whereas in Western culture, one may dress according to time, as evidenced in terms assigned to clothes, such as "evening dress" and "nightgown". However, time may be most important in connection with Thai astrology.





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For example, it is not appropriate for women to touch men's heads, as men are in a higher position and it would be a bad omen to do so. It is also not appropriate to touch the heads of the elderly, or point the feet towards them, as such people are in a higher hierarchical position.¹¹⁸ The body itself is also divided into symbolically higher - the head - and lower - the feet, and must be continually re-positioned according to hierarchical relations to other bodies and places, such as in the relationship between monks and laypersons.¹¹⁹ Thai people believe monks to occupy a higher moral ground than ordinary people as they have given up all worldly belongings and are celibate, and are thus treated with the utmost respect by all, including the king, as is shown by the way we greet them, by bowing to the ground and greeting them at the level of their feet. Moreover, in order to maintain their celibacy and high body status, monks do not allow women to touch them as it is believed to be sinful, and it is part of the monks' religious precepts not to have direct contact with women. So, as can be seen in this vertically hierarchical system, men are believed to be in a higher position than women. The simple explanation is that men are able to relocate themselves to a higher position by changing to the higher *phet* (gender) of monkhood when they are ordained, while women on the whole do not have that ability. Having a higher status has also allowed men to enter some of the spaces that are considered sacred and often reserved for men only, such as the Muay Thai boxing stage. I would suggest that this partly explain the case of Parinya, who was allowed to enter the boxing ring because of his biological sex, but as the boxing ring is considered a sacred space, his feminine appearance disrupted a space that is higher than women's status would allow them

118 In the past, these rules were taken seriously, as shown in the ancient law that if any ordinary people point the feet towards the royal palace they must receive the death penalty.

119 Brian P. McGrath, 'Bangkok Simultopia' in *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis*, eds. by Amy Binzaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach. London: Routledge. 2002. p. 208.





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to occupy. It is the same for monks and royal families, who are able to enter some sacred spaces because they occupy a higher position. Whereas women and feminised men who do not fit into the predominant masculine image of men, whether known as *katoey* or not, occupy a rather lower space than men, as clearly demonstrated in Mahongsorn province, in northern-Thailand, where men used tattoos to signify their adulthood. It is known that men who exhibited their tattoos were allowed to bathe in the northern end of the river, while women and other men who did not have tattoos and were branded as not being men, or as non-men, bathed at the lower end of the river.¹²⁰

However, it is also important to note that this hierarchical system, which can be traced back to the *sakdina* system – a feudal ranking based on the amount of rice land and manpower – and the knowledge of body has also been governed by the belief in karma, whereby one should learn to accept the different power relations into which one is born, each with its own karma that one has to repay or regain in the present life.¹²¹ It is generally believed that the body, including the sex and the ability/disability of the body, has been fixed and predetermined by karma. Through the law of karma, power is materialised in the body, as it is believed that being born with the body of a man results from good karma, since men are believed to have a less difficult life, and more importantly, can be ordained as monks.¹²² Being born a woman or disabled is seen as the result of bad karma, and

120 Niti Pakavat, "Tattoos and the Forming of Identity" in *Pernrang-Pranggay* (ed. by Paritta Chalernpao-Koranantrakul), Bangkok: Krong-kam Japim Kop-fai, 1998, p. 223.

121 According to Suntharaks, the Siam elite attempted to sustain the *sakdina* system despite the 1932 coup abolishing the absolute monarchy, through the persisting view of '... passive acceptance of authority, conformity to existing views of conduct, and a belief that the world and life are governed by the Buddhist law of karma'. (Suntharaks, 1986, p. 76)

122 There has been much research both by Thai and Western scholars on the subject of whether Buddhism creates discrimination against woman and homosexuals, as the Buddha has often been portrayed as reluctant to accept the admission of women into *saneha*





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in both cases the individuals will thus supposedly endure a difficult life. This is also true for *katoeys* and homosexuals, as Thais often believe that being born a *katoey* is the result of bad karma, such as having committed adultery in a previous life. Therefore, *katoeys* are often viewed as an imperfect, if not "abnormal" – *pid-pokkati* – human being who has to suffer and endure the somewhat unusual condition of having a woman's mind in a man's body in order to repay their karma, and this cannot be changed.¹²³ Moreover, the Buddhist teaching that the body is unfixed and impermanent has led to the belief that it is possible to become a *katoey* or homosexual within the circle of reincarnation if one has done a bad deed. As a result, Thai people tend to adopt a more sympathetic approach towards *katoeys* and homosexuals in general, as we all live under the same ethics of reincarnation, as opposed to the violence and discrimination against them seen in some countries in the West. Nevertheless, not only gender but also other forms of status, including wealth, education, family background, etc, also resulting from the belief in the law of karma, I argue, have been used to sustain the hierarchical system in society and as a tool by some elite groups to maintain their power in society.

In this hierarchical arrangement, it is possible to consider *katoeys* and non-masculine men to have a lower status than women. "The Law of the Three Seals" provides evidence of a law governing Thai

(monkhood). Chatsumal Kabilsingh, in her book *Woman's Development in Buddhism*, and Sulak Sivaraksa in *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision of Renewing Society*, have both argued that this has been a misinterpretation as, according to Buddha, every being has an equal opportunity to achieve enlightenment.

123 Although there is no doctrine regarding reincarnation in Buddhism, Thai people still believe that it is possible for one to reincarnate as any form of being besides human, and as a human one can also be different from others in terms of, for instance, sex, wealth, social status, and physical appearance, because of one's karma. This belief has led to an overemphasis on the biological body as an indication to mark and fix one's identity in terms of sex/gender, as being born a man, a woman, or even a *katoey*.





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society prior to the nineteenth century, and refers to *katoeys* as unreliable witnesses in court.¹²⁴ It also supports the belief that generally *katoeys* were, despite the acknowledgement of their existence, being left out of mainstream history, and it might be assumed that they had a low status in the society.¹²⁵ But there is evidence, even in the absence of official historical documents regarding their lives and roles in society, which would lead to the conclusion, from the various roles that were performed by certain individuals (without direct mention of *katoeys*, but whose behaviour and appearance may identify them as *katoeys*), that in some cases *katoeys* were well regarded in Thai society, which is further discussed below.

124 Source unknown.

125 Suwiran Yensabai. "Gav Rihts" in *Krunethev Turakii*. 14th May. 2001. v. 2.





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-RE-COVERING THE KATOEY BODY: THE 'OTHER' SPACE

With no official place in history, *katoeys*, with their un-masculine characteristics and no properly identified biological sex, I would argue, could be seen as standing outside the dominant paradigm of male/female sex and masculine/feminine gender which may separate them socially and spatially from heterosexual determinations as the 'other'. To re-cover the missing body that has rarely been found in Thai history, one needs to look further than simply the form of the *katoeys'* bodies. As they have been left out of the dominant ideology, perceiving them as Foucault's heterotopia may provide an alternative way to understand and locate them within dominant history, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter. Looking into those other spaces that differ from the general arrangements of Thai society, such as brothels, harems, places in folklore tales, and sacred places, will certainly provide a fresh look at how *katoeys'* bodies have long been operating within dominant ideology and possibly functioning as a site of resistance to it. Their bodies have become a site that enables them to be "absolutely different from all the sites they reflect and speak about" and to create a kind of other space or other site. To understand the implications of the kinds of spaces they were producing, one would need to recognise the possible roles they performed in society.

The first of their possible roles that I believe might best explain the real and yet imagined kinds of spaces *katoeys* occupied was that of spirit mediums. As spirit mediums, *katoeys* embodied Thais' long belief in the sacredness of spirits, including the divinity that exists in trees, mountains, rivers, etc, as well as ancestral spirits that have been part of the world and co-exist in everyday Thai life. The belief, that was once part of Buddhism from the time of its origins in Thailand, was similar to what in Hinduism is known as animism, and became materialised and embodied in the spirit medium's body,





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whose ambiguity as to their sex/gender identity as well as their chastity, particularly in terms of the opposite sex", added to their sacredness.¹ Though there is no direct connection with transvestism as the source of the *katoeys'* power, as in several cultures in Asia, there is the existence of a possible third or ambiguous sex/gender which has often been linked to spiritual potency, as featured in an essay by Ian Wilson, 'Reog Ponorogo: Spirituality, Sexuality, and Power in a Javanese Performance Tradition'.² He describes the *warok* as part of a long Javanese tradition, who was a spiritual advisor to the ruler and well-respected in the society, and in order to maintain his power he could not have a relationship with a woman.³ Instead, he had a relationship with a *gemblak*, a young boy with androgynous appearance.

Though the spirit medium does not necessarily have to become or be a *katoey*, it often happens that the spirits who possess the medium are of the opposite sex, which quite often leads to a change in personality and behaviour that can either be temporary, as when possessed, or permanent. In this regard, those who are spirit mediums often possess both the male and female qualities of the *katoeys*, as they exhibit varying degrees of cross-dressing and cross-behaviours. Or they may appear in highly ambiguous clothes and display behaviour which may not clearly be identified as either

1 Christianity and Western ideology had a long-lasting impact on attempts to separate what should and should not be included in Buddhism. Religious belief and the belief in the spiritual, which were once seen as different sides of the same coin, were made to separate from each other. (Buddhism = Buddha + *Saiya* literally means mythic, supernatural.) The belief in the spiritual has since been deemed uncivilized, and at worst the enemy of Buddhism to this day.

2 Although this was not always the case, as the spirit could be the same sex/gender as the medium, though might be from a different hierarchy or personality, and in many cases there was same-sex intimacy expressed in the form of gossiping.

3 Ian Douglas Wilson, *Reog Ponorogo: Spirituality, Sexuality, and Power in Javanese Performance Tradition* from <http://www-wsshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue2/Warok.html>





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male or female. In normal circumstances, these reverse roles of feminised male and masculined female would have positioned them at the bottom of hierarchical system. However, I believe that by becoming spirit mediums, in a way they have changed their status to a higher *phet*, thus raising their status above that of ordinary men and women. With the possibility of changing their status by changing their self according to the rules of each hierarchical space, *katoeys* may possibly have been well regarded for their ability to change surface appearances and associate themselves with things or activities connected with higher positions in hierarchical system.⁴

In many ways, whilst being possessed, their bodies produce, and become, a kind of site where the past, present and future are juxtaposed in one single space, as well as where humans, animals, deities, women, men, old, and young are found to be boundless and collapsing into one body. I would argue that this idea is not at all foreign to Thais, but that instead it reflects Thai ideology which sees the body beyond the boundary of physical appearance, either as human beings, whether men or women, or animals.⁵ Their bodies have created a kind of space that is out of all space and out of all time, an unreal space, a kind of ideal place that co-exists with and yet is absent from real life. The boundary of absence and presence, the inside and the outside, the real and imagined, is blurred and opens up another kind of space that takes place in the body of the spirit medium and which allows them to rise above social hierarchy and other social constraints. Their bodies are no longer seen as sexed bodies. They embody a kind of power that represents both fear and respect,

4 There are also the spaces outside the box, both vertically and horizontally, that ordinary people may not be allowed to enter or change themselves into, such as being a king. (Aewsriwong, 1995, p. 139)

5 Paritta Chalermphao-Koranantakul, "Rang nai Lakorn Chaoban" ("Body in Folklore Theatre") in *Pernrang-Prangguay*, Paritta Chalermphao-Koranantakul (ed.). Bangkok: Koojai Printing. 1998. p. 146.





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as the spirits who occupy the bodies have the power of, for instance, granting wishes, healing and foreseeing the future, and at the same time the power to destroy and punish those who disobey or show disrespect.

Their roles, I argue, have become a kind of mechanism which helps to maintain order in society, as people are controlled by the fear that if they behave or act wrongly – *phitpi* (literally meaning “to have done wrong to a ghost”), a term normally used among villagers – the spirits or the ghosts will harm them in one way or another. Their roles are made more important by their ability to defuse tensions arising from social hierarchy, particularly from a gender point of view, as women and some people who may be known as *katoeys* are able to take part in religious activities and embody a kind of power that often belongs to men. They become, in a way, leaders in spiritual beliefs, just as monks are heads of religious beliefs, which were once inseparable in Buddhism.

I believe it was the practice of Buddhism that provided a way for the possibility of the ambiguous sex/gender to exist in what was considered a mainstream culture. However, this was to change with the gradual decline in spiritual belief and the attempt, since the late 18th century, to separate spiritual belief from Buddhism.⁶ At the time, with the increasing contact with Westerners, Christianity made

6 *Katoeys* and homosexuals had long been acknowledged in Buddhism, as suggested by Peter Jackson's 'Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism in the Thai Buddhist Tradition' (from <http://www.enabling.org/ia/vipassana/Archive/J/Jackson/homoBuddhaJackson.html>). The Pali scriptures contain a numerous references to sexual behaviour that today may be identified as that of homosexuals or transvestites, often referred to on a par with women, dead bodies, animals and inanimate objects with whom monks should not engage in sexual activities. He further suggests that elsewhere in the *Vinaya* and in other sections of the *Tipitaka* it is made clear that *ubhatobyanjanaka* (hermaphrodite or *katoey tae*) and *pandaka* (*katoey tiam*) are spiritually and ritually inferior to men and are often compared to women and criminals.





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an impact in such a way that there was a need in Thai society to draw a clear boundary between what should and should not be included in Buddhism. There was also the need to reform Buddhism to coincide with the start of the Rattanakosin period (1782-present), which placed the belief in spirits outside Buddhism.⁷ Therefore, the roles of women and *katoeys* were diminished, as was their importance in the religion and, in a way, in society as a whole. Today, despite that fact that spirit possession still continues and has retained its popularity for some Thai villagers, it is seen by the authorities (the law and religious bodies) as some kind of witchcraft, a cult, a hoax, a resistance to Buddhism and, at worst, as against Buddhism. Since spirit possession is now regarded as illicit, the *katoey* mediums, instead of being seen as a sacred site have instead become a site of resistance as well as a site of struggle, as they embody a kind of ideology that is no longer officially acceptable as knowledge. It is the kind of site that Foucault describes in relation to those whose behaviour deviates from the norms operating at any given moment, and thus need to be kept at the periphery of the society.

The second possible role for *katoeys* is as artists or performers. Nagavajara (1994) notes the importance of the performing arts in Southeast Asia and some other Asian countries, in teaching the public about the social poetics of shifting genders and the flexibility of gender boundaries.⁸ Through my research, although there is still no written history to confirm the relationship between the performing arts and any gender-bending tendency in everyday life, gender transformation is at the heart of its aesthetics. *Lakon*, a form of traditional Thai theatre that evolved around the

7 Nithi Aewsriwong, *Pah-kao-ma, Pah-sin, Underwear and Etc.: Culture, Transformation and Others*, Bangkok: Matichon, 1995, p. 157.

8 Penny Van Esterik, *Materialising Thailand*. Oxford: Berz. 2000. p. 219.





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14th century, is a likely site in providing evidence of the existence of gender ambiguity within Thai society.⁹ *Lakon*, later known as *lakon nok* ("theatre of the outer court"), was performed by all-male performers, while later more refined versions evolved within the Royal Court, using an all-female cast, called *lakon nai* ("theatre of the inner court"). Both kinds of *lakon* were widely performed in the *Ratanakosin* period, both for the inner court and throughout the country. The better the ability of the performers to perform the role of cross-gender or to disguise themselves as the opposite sex, the more the performers were hailed for their artistic prowess.¹⁰ Though their artistic ability may not have led to respectable positions for all *katoeys*, it was true for the performers at the Royal Court. As for performers in private troupes, these kinds of professionals have long been disregarded by Thai people. Nevertheless, the theatre troupe has in a way become a kind of heterotopia space where there is no real place, but only the continuity of moving from place to place. While these theatre troupes are still intact, they allow what may be considered to be against existing social norms, i.e. effeminate men, man-acting women, and homosexual acts, or what Foucault would call 'illicit sex', to shelter and hide, and where the boundary between real life and fiction has become diffused.¹¹ The performers, instead of portraying themselves as they are, reflect instead the embodiment of

9 Patraboon Wattanasombat, *The Dance Drama of Thailand, Michigan: University Microfilms International*, 1981, p. 73. (She further explains that *lakon* was developed from a more primitive form of theatrical expression called *lakon jatri*, with origins in animistic rituals. It often drew its subject material from the Buddhist Jataka tale of Manora. Its early form used only three male performers: one playing the heroic male role, one playing the female role, and the third playing clown, demon, animal, and other roles.)

10 The famous film *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, China, 1993), although set in a different context, displays a kind of similarity which may also be found in other parts of Asia where sexual transformation has become a significant part of the display artistic ability that may fuse with real life.

11 The theatre itself, according to Foucault (1986) in one of his principles for heterotopias, is already a kind of heterotopia, where it is capable of "juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other".





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the ideologies of the characters they portray, whether the morality of the character is good or bad. Hence a kind of heterotopia, a real yet imagined space.

Lakon nai, which was performed only by females, became part of the scene cultivated within the exclusively female residence of the Royal Court in the old days. Thus, *Lakon Nok* could have become a likely site for homosexual acts to take place. The idea of *len puen*, literally "play with friend", but in reality a sexual relationship between women (now known as lesbianism), was not foreign to the royal children of the Royal Inner Court.¹² Although there is no clear record of homosexual acts between men in general in Siam, I believe lesbianism is well placed in Thai history, as evidenced by its appearance in poetry, in the speech of King Rama IV warning his female entourage of the inner court against the improper behaviour of *len puen*, particularly among his wives, as it would constitute being sexually unfaithful to him, and also in the diary of American ambassador Townsend Harris, where he noted that "the act of *len puen* is a common practice in Siam and that there has never been any law to punish it except in the case of monks." However, he compares *len puen* to an animal act, which points out the different attitudes towards homosexuality.¹³

For homosexuals, *lakon nok* has been one of the likely sites for homosexual acts, whether involving effeminate men or not. When it became fashionable to patronise theatre troupes, the involvement

12 Not until the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1867) were female performers allowed to be included in the *lakon* outside the Royal Court.

13 Kittisak Prokkati, 'The Tale of Homosexuality' in *Thammasat Law Journal: Law and Sex*, Volume 2, year 13th, Bangkok: Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 1982, p. 92. Prior to the eighteenth century, there was a law within the inner court banning women to from sexual involvement with one another, and anyone who disobeyed would be subjected to 50 beatings with a leather whip.)





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of homosexuals with persons of higher status was often cited. One clear example was when King Rama III criticised one of his entourage, Rakronnarej, for the 'abnormality' of his sexual activities, as he was not spending time with his wife and children while sponsoring the theatre troupe, and was sexually involved with a performer. The King also referred to other members of his entourage whose behaviour was similar to that of Rakronnarej and compared them to some of the Chinese people who were sexually involved with classical Chinese opera performers.¹⁴ Although Rakronnarej was later sentenced to death, it was for his plan to overthrow the king, not for his homosexuality.¹⁵

While *lakons*, both *nai* and *nok*, encourage gender-bending, the heroes themselves do not at all fit Western stereotypes of masculinity. Instead they possessed a feminine quality that may be considered quite like that of a *katoey* today. The super-masculine characters were often not the only choice to portray a hero, as found in much classical Thai literature, such as *Pra-apai-manee* and *Inao*. These feature heroes who display intelligence, spiritual strength and beauty, which in a Western sense are terms used for females. However, in Thai literature they are often used to describe the heroes' physical appearance as well as female characters. Rather than be praised for their physical strength and the ability to fight, it is intelligence and kindness that are the desired qualities. In the case of the hero of *Pra-apai-manee*, he uses his intelligence and skill to play a magic song on the Thai oboe.

14 As suggested in the film *Farewell My Concubine*, in which one of leading characters impersonates women both in real life and on stage and becomes an object of desire for many men.

15 Kittisak Prokkati, 'The Tale of Homosexuality' in *Thammasat Law Journal: Law and Sex*, Volume 2, year 13th, Bangkok: Faculty of Law, Thammasat University. 1982. p. 92.





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The effeminate characters are acceptable and lead to high praise for the performer's ability to transform himself. Even King Rama VI, or King Vajiravudh, who was well-known for his artistic ability, was on several occasions photographed in female dresses as he performed in one of his plays at the palace. But although he introduced a new kind of modern theatre to the Thai people, it may not have been acceptable to display effeminate behaviour beyond the realm of the theatre and the space of the theatre troupe.¹⁶ Although the above situation, I believe, is probably still true today and cabaret shows have become a nurturing space for *katoeys*, both emotionally and socially, it is the space beyond the theatre that may have changed over the years.

I would like to suggest that a third possible role for *katoeys*/homosexuals, much less documented in Thai history, is, according to Jackson (1990, p. 195), that they might have provided a semi-legitimate sexual outlet for men in rural Thai society, as it is a taboo in Thai society to have pre-marital sexual relations except with prostitutes.¹⁷ Nevertheless, his suggestion may prove unlikely in practice, though it is true that for women to have sexual relations with men before marriage or, among well-bred women, any social contact at all, was strictly prohibited, especially among women at the Royal Court. I believe this is very likely one of the reasons which caused the much-documented *len-puen* behaviour among women. For men, it was perhaps not difficult to find sexual outlet with female prostitutes, whose history dates back to at least the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767). It was also convenient for men of a higher status to find sexual pleasure with their slave women, who were

16 As seen in the National Library Museum. It must be noted that several Western authors (Anderson and Fishel, among others) mention the possibility of King Vajiravudh having been a homosexual.

17 Jackson claims that it is perhaps one reason why *katoeys* are more acceptable in Thailand, as it is more acceptable for an unmarried youth to visit a *katoey* than to have sex with an unmarried woman. (1990, p. 195)





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merely men's property.¹⁸ It can also be seen in "The Law of the Three Seals" that men were allowed to buy females in financial difficulties to become third-category wives, the lowest rank.¹⁹ Women could be sold by fathers/husbands as they wished.

Considering the circumstances, *katoeys* as a legitimate or semi-legitimate sexual outlet is not a convincing possibility in ancient Thai society. Instead it was prohibited, particularly, since the time of Buddha, for a monk to have sexual relationships with a *katoey*, (known as *pandaka* in *Pali*), and further, *katoeys* were prohibited from being ordained in order to avoid any disruptive effect on the predominantly heterosexual monks.²⁰ In addition, during the reign of King Rama I, The Law of Three Seals instructed the people to keep the moral precepts of Buddha's teaching, including the prohibition of illicit sex, whether anal or vaginal.²¹

Jackson (1990, p. 198) further claims that sexual contact between men and *katoeys* was part of village life, which may explain the non-homophobic attitude among the people of countryside, which still to some extent holds true today. *Katoeys* in general are seen as sexually available, as shown in the BBC documentary *Lady Boys* (Jeremy Marre, 1992) and as portrayed in several media channels, including a recent book entitled *Lang Man Nang Show* ["Behind the Scene"]: *the life of a katoey*

18 The period of King Rama V's reign (1868-1873) marked the beginning of the end of slavery in Thailand.

19 Yujira Jirapinyo, Prostitution in Siamweb Cyber Culture from http://www.siamweb.org/content/News-Culture/155/index_eng.php

20 Peter Jackson, 'Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism' in the *Thai Buddhist Tradition*, <http://www.enabling.org/ia/vipassana/Archive/J/Jackson/homoBuddhaJackson.html>

21 Kittisak Prokkati, 'The Tale of Homosexuality' in *Thammasat Law Journal: Law and Sex*, Volume 2, year 13th, Bangkok: Faculty of Law, Thammasat University. 1982. p. 89.





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show girl" (Dechavuth Chantagaro, 2002), which refers to *katoeys* as the "mobile sexual outlet". However, I want to argue that this role may prove to be highly problematic. The claim by Eric Allyn (1991, p. 147) that the role has probably made them well-regarded within Thai society-might be seen as contradictory, by referring to the fact that in northern villages effeminate men were ridiculed and shamed, and at the same time suggesting that the men's involvement with them was acceptable. It can also be seen in the film *Vitee Kon Kla* ("Path of the Brave", Muddasanith, 1990) about a fictional ancient tribe. This film, which features an effeminate character, Jomu, shows that effeminate characters who like to do women's chores and do not conform to the type of masculinity that defines men in the story are a source of shame for the family and the whole village.²² Therefore, it is possible to assume that involvement with effeminate men will bring shame to the person involved.

Further evidence can be seen in films featuring *katoeys*, such as *Pleng Sud Tai* or "The Last Song" (Pisan Akraseranee, 1985) and its sequel *Rak Toraman* or "The Tortured Love" (Pisan Akraseranee, 1986), portraying *katoeys* as sexual outlets for straight men who still want to preserve his masculinity and heterosexual status.²³ The modern synonym of *pu-ying pra-phet song* or "second type of woman" probably places them in the category of a mere sexual outlet that understandably can justify men's sexual pleasure when the first type is not available. Perhaps history does not provide

22 As a result of pressure from the village people – particularly from Jomu's brother, who becomes head of the village after he finds out about Jopa's deviant sexual encounter with a goat – Jomu is forced to follow his brother's path, the path of the brave, by venturing out into the mystery forest and trying to come back alive. However, he fails and ends up dead.

23 Though one needs to separate this from homosexual acts that may involve only masculine men whom rule of *kalatesa* allows to pose as heterosexual men, while in private enables homosexual acts to take place without any constraints from the society.





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enough evidence of the availability of female prostitution and the less strict attitudes towards sex between men and women in the past. Their roles today though are not much different from that hidden possibility. The darkness of the night and the dark corners of the streets have become a main means to retain a degree of secrecy (albeit an open one), for katoeys to continue their roles as sexual outlets for men who maintain their superiority within the dominant paradigm. But at the same time, the other name, Phet-tee-sam ("the third sex"), also suggests a distinctive third sex/gender who occupies a middle ground between male/masculine and female/feminine.²⁴ As well as the names of the magazines for gays and katoeys, Midway and New Half have also suggested the idea of being in-between, the new alternative sex/gender. It is such contradictory nature of katoeys has made them such an interesting subject.

The katoey body, as suggested by the meaning of their name, "to be different", is markedly different from the male concept of masculinity. These bodies have re-emerged as a kind of heterotopia that has become both 'the other' and yet part of the society. It is also a site filled with contradiction as well as with possibility. It signifies at the same time the feelings of shame, fear, respectfulness, sexual desires, etc, that have become entangled, jumbled together in the same space. Nevertheless, one needs to understand the ever-changing phases of modern society that impose different meanings on to the katoey body, which I shall demonstrate further in the next section.

24 See Glossary: Thai terms for *katoey*. It is suggested by some Western academics, such as Rosalind Morris (*Three sexes and Four Sexualities: Redressing the Discourses on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Thailand, Position 2* (1), 1994, p. 15-43), that Thailand had possessed the "system of three sexes" or the "system of the third gender", which includes hermaphrodite or *katoey*, from her interpretation of Buddhist origin myths in northern Thailand.





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SURVIVING AND TRANSFORMING THE KATOEY BODY THE EXCLUSION OF THE 'UNCIVILISED' BODY

As I discussed earlier, the significance of body surface not only individualises each individual and dictates how they should manifest their body surface and behave in society, but it is, also directly related to power relations in Thai society. These implications are taken as high as to the national level, where body, surface, gender, and sexuality become materialised through nationalistic Thai movements from which *katoeys* and other 'marked' bodies are excluded.²⁵ With the increasing contact with Westerners and a massive Chinese immigration in the first decade of this century, as well as the invasion of Japan in the Second World War, several questions regarding identities on both national and individual levels were raised and sparked massive national movements in Thai history. These national movements include two particular events. King Rama VI's reign and the dictatorial period of General Phibun Songkharam defined Thai national identity and proved to have a long-lasting impact on modern Thai society. Their policies influenced people's perspective in relation to body, gender and sexuality. Their policies will help to address the relationship between the body and the regimes of power/knowledge, as well as to explore early Western influence on gender/sexuality in Thai society. What is more important is how heterosexual ideology, through the different regimes, has manifested itself in practices whereby homosexuals have been pushed to the periphery, or even outlawed. I will not attempt to analyse the whole nationalistic process, as it has been done elsewhere. However, it is important to signal the change that has transformed the understanding of the *katoey* body as heterotopia and site of resistance, and homosexuality as a whole.

25 These 'marked' bodies may refer largely to Chinese immigrants as well as to those from other neighboring countries.





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- *ELITE NATIONALISM:*

At a time of increasing contact with Westerners during the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910-1925), the ability to transform the surface prominently was defined as one of the nation's characteristics.¹⁵¹ By trying to modernise Siam and avoid colonisation by European colonisers, who were actively occupying neighbouring countries, King Vajiravudh attempted to bring Siamese lifestyles and customs up to Western notions of 'civilised' behaviours. Central to his effort was the transformation of gender and sexual norms that formed part of the symbols of Western civilisation.¹⁵² The Western cultural and social implications inevitably had their impact on Thai society, including Victorian cultural attitudes to women through missionaries and the Western community.

Victorian attitudes towards gender and sexuality had a direct influence over the Siam elite, many of whom, including King Vajiravudh, had been sent to Europe, especially England, by King Vajiravudh's father, King Rama V, to be educated. He himself had been educated by a foreign governess. King Vajiravudh's attempt to transform the nation was carried out through the first official nationalistic movement in Thai history. It was also the first time that Thailand had adopted the modern nation-

151 It is generally accepted that Thailand was first associated with the West during the period of King Narai Maharaja (Ayuttaya Dynasty, early 18th century). Holland and Portugal were the early European nations that sent missionaries to Thailand for the religious conversion of its people and also for trading purposes. However, the association did not make any significant impact in terms of cultural and social changes.

152 Though the urge to transform the nation by following Western standards had been developing since the period of King Rama IV when, according to Pattana (1993), the real globalisation started as Siam was forced to sign a treaty in 1855 by Sir John Bowring, a British envoy of Queen Victoria, which aimed to benefit trade between two countries. The image of Western countries at the time was defined as 'civilisation' because they appeared to come from a different culture, with higher technology and with dangerous weapons.





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state to match western counterparts.¹⁵³ In order to build up patriotism, his nationalism was created from the basic duty of all Thai people to love, be loyal to, and defend the three most important institutions, which could not exist without one another. These were – inspired by the British trinity “God, King, and Country” – “Nation, Religion, and King”. He emphasised the monarchy and saw it as the key to nationhood, though his nationalism, seen as elite, sought to impose “a standardised, homogeneous, centrally sustained high culture on its subjects”.¹⁵⁴

Instead of enforcing laws to promote his idea of nationalism, King Vajiravudh used various other means, preferably through numerous essays and plays and by setting an example in his close social circle of the Siamese elite.¹⁵⁵ These emphasises on representations underlined the significance of surface to the nation, to a degree that they could be seen as staged or performed on a grand scale.¹⁵⁶ It still epitomises Thai culture and society to the present day. The significance of the surface, I argue, could be seen through his attempt to modernise the country by reorganising Thai notions of gender and sexuality according to Western standards of clothing, hairstyles, and public roles of *pu-chai* (man) and *pu-ying* (woman) as he saw the degree of civilisation of the country symbolised through the lifestyle and status of elite women in particular. The ambiguous appearance of men and women often confused Westerners, who used the more ‘extreme’ gender oppositions in the

153 For the first time, the Thai kingdom was viewed as a state established in a neatly defined national territory and based on the concept of the Siamese Thai ethnic group.

154 Penny Van Esterik, *Materialising Thailand*, Oxford: Berg, 2000, p. 98.

155 Thamora V. Fishel, *Romances of the Sixth Reign in Transforming Sex/Gender Orders in Twentieth Century Thailand* (eds. Nerida M. Cook and Peter A. Jackson), Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999, p. 154.

156 *ibid.* p. 154.





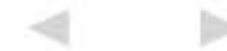
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European construction of masculinity and femininity. They were made a priority for change, in order to a distinct appearance between male and female, based on the Western model of masculinity and femininity. The women, were encouraged to grow long hair instead of the preferred short manly-style haircut worn by both men and women during that period, and to wear the skirt-like *pha-sin* instead of the more trouser-like *chongkraben*.¹⁵⁷ Betel-nut chewing, which was fashionable among women and caused black teeth, was banned in order to pursue the Western ideal of beauty which included white teeth, as opposed to the Thai ideal of beauty. The men were also encouraged to wear trouser-suits instead of the old-style *chongkraben*, the comfortable draped pants worn by both men and women.¹⁵⁸

It was not only personal appearances that concerned King Vajiravudh. He also attempted to transform the public role of men and women as well as their sexual relationships. Despite the fact that King Vajiravudh paid close attention to women's appearance and encouraged women to participate more in the social life and accompany their husbands to public functions in the western manner, the women were mere decorations in social scenes and pushed to minor roles in achieving the cause of nationalism. While men had a direct role in the development of nationalism by participating in the Wild Tiger Corps, a mass paramilitary group established by King Vajiravudh to promote national unity, women were excluded from direct participation. They were left to sideline campaigns such as fundraising and supporting their husbands. The roles of devoted wives and mothers who instilled nationalistic values in their children were portrayed as the ideal roles for women through several of the King's novels. The increasing gap between the public and private spheres was made clearly

157 *ibid.*, p. 160.

158 *ibid.*, p. 160.





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visible during his reign, which also led to a shifting relationship between men and women in the Western manner.

Siam's modernising economy brought with it bourgeois patterns of sex-segregated work, while at the same time introducing an ideology that women and men should mix socially
(Fishel, 1999, p. 158)

Although he attempted to modernise the nation by adopting many western practices, there was limit at which he drew the line of what he considered too "Western." This is evidenced by his description of one of the women characters in his novel, *Hua-jai Chai Num*, when he talked of her as more like a *farang* (white western) than a Thai woman. She was considered too liberated by Thai standards with such behaviour as quarrelling with her husband in public. The struggle to find the right balance between Thainess and the West had been the significant issue underlying King Vajiravudh's nationalism on both the level of the individual and the national. The relationship between the two has also proved to be a problematic one up until today, as the West is both desired and feared. While wanting to modernise the country according to the West, there was also the need to locate and preserve Thai values and identity in order not to fall under colonial rule as had happened elsewhere in the neighboring countries. Achieving such a balance inevitably constructed a category of rigid sexual binary opposition and racialised outsiders, in which—"Chineseness" was perceived as undesirable in opposition to what was Western¹⁵⁹ Thus such exclusions marked the boundaries of nationhood. A new mode of desired body in terms of race and gender, then, was constructed through

159 Thamora V. Fishel, *Romances of the Sixth Reign in Transforming Sex/Gender Orders in Twentieth Century Thailand* (eds. by Nerida M. Cook and Peter A. Jackson). Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. 1999. p. 165.



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King Vajiravudh's nationalism, where the concern of surface and image played a significant part throughout. The individual identity had become not only the emblem of modernity and civilisation but also served as part of national identification. Although the king's achievement was limited in its scope and impact only on the elite level, I would argue, he successfully laid a foundation for the construction of modern Thai identity, one in which the sexual and racial boundaries were clearly drawn.





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PIBUN'S NATIONALISM:

Field-Marshal Pibun Songkharam, Prime Minister during 1938-1944, took nationalism to the extreme, attempting to use force and enact legislation to carry out his ideas, as he felt driven to build a new Thai society when the Japanese troops entered Thailand during the Second World War. While King Vajiravudh had perhaps succeeded in creating the desired body that stood for civilisation by Western standards, Pibun took a step further as he imposed certain rules and regulations directly onto the body in order to construct the government version of civilised Thai identity, both individual and national. These changes may have lasted only five years during his accession to power but they had an enormous effect on all aspects of Thai life even to the present day. The cultural revolution was his prime objective to achieve a new and greater Thailand in which Thais would appear civilised to the outside world. This attitude, he took from the successful efforts of the two great kings, Rama V and Vajiravudh, to modernise the country in response to Western threats. However, Pibun's nationalism was a rather different one from King Vajiravudh's, as Pibun conceptualised the nation as based on Thai commoners, whereas King Vajiravudh had created the nationhood from the elite group.¹⁶⁰ Instead of building his nationalism on "Nation, Religion, and King", he based it on people who belonged to the same nation. Despite the different perspective, Pibun's attempts to modernise the country were still based on Western models of civilisation.

In order to achieve his goal, the government passed a series of *Rattha Niyom* or Cultural Mandates to serve as guidelines for people to follow the correct practices.¹⁶¹ These included prescribed dress,

160 Mattani Mojdara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development of and Modernization*, Bangkok: O.S. Printing House, 1996, p. 190.

161 Thamsook Numnonda, Pibulsongkram's 'Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence', 1941-1945





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daily activities and general manners for the achievement of national greatness. These guidelines were aimed at creating what was supposed to be a new modern era for Thai people to construct a civilised national image abroad. The body was then manipulated, subjugated and under constant surveillance:

The people were exhorted to divide their day into three parts: one for working, one for personal needs, and one for resting and sleeping. The Government paid close attention even to the people's eating and sleeping habits and stipulated that a person should eat four meals a day, sleep between six and eight hours, and should also exercise, tend a vegetable plot, keep animals, plant trees, converse with friends and relatives, listen to the radio, read or listen to the preaching of the Dharma.

(Numnonda, 1978, p. 236)

For Pibun the body had become the main instrument to represent Thailand as a civilised country as well as for constructing Thai national identity. The particular concern with the body's appearance also proved significant in his process, wherein he insisted on doing everything to change the appearance of Thai people – by requesting, suggesting, persuading, issuing state guidelines, and finally enforcing new laws,¹⁶² in order to represent Thailand as a civilised country and to remind the Japanese and the Europeans that Thais were like Westerners. Dress codes were issued in which both traditional and

in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 9.2, p. 235.

162 Plaek Phibun Songkhram. "Khamklao voed vrachum." (The Opening Speech) Vol. 1. 1941. p. 20.



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Chinese elements of clothing were rejected as improper and non-Thai respectively. The Western style of clothing was preferred for all men and women in the country. Hats and shoes had become a necessary item for both men and women when appearing in public.

As well as attempting to change the outward appearance of individual Thai people into a Western mode, Pibun also attempted to revive Thai heritage and culture in such a way as to retain its own identity, while still appearing modern and civilised by Western standards. His control over the appearance of performers was to shape the discourse on the body up to the present day. The government demanded that in all theatre performances, the performers must wear shoes (socks for local performances) as bare feet would be seen as uncivilised. He was also concerned that male and female roles must be performed according to biological sex, unlike the same-sex performances of *lakon nai* and *lakon nok* that had been the norm in the past. However, the most significant change was the way in which the government banned certain kinds of characters from appearing on stage. Characters considered ambiguous, such as half-men-half women, half-human-half animals, were branded uncivilised. Such is the case of the Thai fairytale *Kinnaree*, where the main character had a female upper body with a bird-like bottom part, including wings and tail. The performers were not allowed to include the tail during Pibun's cultural revolution as it featured human and animal in the same body. These traditional characters reflected Thai ideology about the body, which saw the body beyond the boundary of physical appearance, whether of human beings, men or women, or animals, as I suggested earlier.¹⁶³ There is no longer any space for these kinds of bodies in society, so, just as the old 'uncivilised' world that they represented had gradually disappeared amidst the spread

163 Paritta Chalermphao-Koranantakul, "Rang nai Lakom Chaoban" (Body in Common Theatre) in *Pernrang-Prangguay*, Paritta Chalermphao-Koranantakul (ed.). Bangkok: Koojai Printing. 1998. p.146.





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of Western standardisation across the globe, so did these concepts. Though Pibun's nation-building programme was short-lived, its influence on ideology has carried through until today.

With the attempt to become a 'civilised' nation, particularly through Pibun's policies, the *katoey* body has clearly been excluded from what is considered to be civilised. *Katoey* bodies have become a signifier for something in the past, the 'uncivilised' past that should never be allowed to re-emerge in modern-day Thailand. The 'uncivilised' past, which perhaps includes village life and farming, was abandoned in favour of becoming part of the New Industrialised Countries in Southeast Asia (NICS) during the late 1980s. *Katoeys* ended up at the wrong end of the power relationships in the binary opposition, whether city/village, trader/farmer, upper class/lower class and Western/Thai. This was particularly true at the time of the emergence of the gay and lesbian subculture in the early 1990s, which was and is influenced by and identified with Western and middle-class people. It was a situation that gradually began after World War II, when a considerable Western expatriate community settled in Bangkok. Many of them could be identified as homosexuals, but their behaviour did not fit the common knowledge of Thai homosexuals, whose very image was strictly identified with the term *katoey*. However, as Jackson argues, it was not until the explosive press coverage of prominent expatriate Darrell Berrigan's murder case that the term 'gay' as a different entity from *katoey* emerged among the general public.■

Berrigan's homosexual behaviour and his association with Thai *katoeys* brought the subject of

164 Peter Jackson, "An American Death in Bangkok: The Murder of Darrell Berrigan and the Hybrid Origins of Gay Identity in 1960s Thailand" in *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, eds. Carolyn Dinshaw and David M. Halperin, Volume 5, Number 3, Duke University Press, 1999, p. 361.



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katoeys to the forefront and, more importantly, confirmed the existence of masculine-type men who had sex not just with the typical effeminate *katoeys*, but also with other masculine men known as *katoey pu-chai*.¹⁶⁵ Through the intense interest of the media, the homosexual world, particularly those involved with prostitution, was thoroughly investigated, leading to the discovery that brought a disturbing truth to Thais. The term 'gay' was quickly separated from the term *katoey*.

Embodying the 'uncivilised', deviant bodies, they have been intensely policed by the authorities, particularly in public spaces, where any kind of deviant body is preventing from emerging. This is evidenced by the Rajabhat Institute's ban and the limitation of *katoey* representation on television imposed by Chuan Leekpai's government (1997-2001). Their bodies need to be kept on the periphery, in the same way as the bodies of prostitutes need to be kept at the site of Patpong, and the madman within the boundary of an asylum, where their existence cannot disrupt public order and the reproduction of normative gender and sexual arrangements. Though it is possible to argue that they are part of everyday life as they are clearly visible on the streets of Bangkok, they are still seen as the 'other' in society, a kind of spectacular 'other', as they are often seen in the concealed space of a *katoey* show in which their bodies have become a spectacle under the heterosexual 'gaze'. In many ways, their bodies have been represented as a kind of exotic/spectacle in the same way as the bodies of Thai classical dancers are displayed for the gaze of Westerners. Their spectacle bodies turned into a commodity for sale, which soon became the symbol of Thailand and opened their exotic spectacle to the gaze of both Thais and foreigners, as seen in the popularity of *katoey* shows and the media craze around Parinya, whose image has been used to promote the country's ancient

165 *ibid.* pp. 384-385.





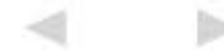
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sport of Muay Thai and the tourist industry.

In the following section, I will look at how Parinya's event created a kind of spectacle 'other' that has allowed him to blur the boundaries that confined *katoeys* to their own space, and to move beyond the stage of *katoey* shows and disrupt normative gender boundaries: men/women/*katoeys*. I will also consider the way his body, a kind of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* body, as I suggested earlier, has been used as a strategy to situate *katoeys* within the dominant ideology and at the same time be able to critique it from the within.





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REDEFINING KATOEY THROUGH THE PERFORMATIVE BODY OF PARINYA

What is most remarkable about the Parinya event itself, for me, is the fact that it took place at what could be considered to be the ultimate symbol of Thai masculinity and Thai culture as a whole. Muay Thai is not only a national sport for Thai people, as it is perceived nowadays, but it is also an age-old unique art form of self-defence that has been inseparable from the Thai way of life and has been one of the significant elements that helped construct the Thai masculinity culture as we know it today. Muay Thai has long been used to define what it means to be a "real" man or look pu-chai tae or look pu-chai tem tua (literally meaning a whole-body man) in Thai society, as it is often believed that only men who can master the art of Muay Thai are "real" men.¹⁶⁶ Real men can be identified through the biological male body, physical strength and a righteous mind. Muay Thai requires the bare body and strong mind to battle it out for superiority among men, as no weapon is used, and they would fight until one dropped or gave up, leaving the man standing as the winner.¹⁶⁷ In the past, men wanted to be trained and fight to become "real" men as they would learn respect from others. Moreover, the title also brought with it power and domination over both men and women.¹⁶⁸ The muscular body,

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There is little evidence of when Muay Thai originated in Thailand, but it is believed to have developed simultaneously with the influence of Buddhism in the Sukhothai Era, around 1238-1408. Inscriptions in stone columns at Sukhothai indicate that it frequently fought with its neighbours. Consequently, the city had to instill in her soldiers knowledge and skills concerning the use of weapons such as swords and spears, and also how to use the body and weapons in hand-to-hand combat. Skills such as kicking, kneeling, punching, and elbowing were thus developed. Muay Thai training centres arose around the city, some being in temple areas where monks doubled as instructors. (<http://www.wmc-ifma.com/History/Era.html>)

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It used to be only a cloth that went through a special ritual for its sacred power and was wrapped around both hands. It could be considered only weapon as it creates impact for the punch.

168

In the past, Muay Thai was even one of the means to recruit men for a high-ranking position in the army; therefore those who mastered Muay Thai had better opportunities in society. (Naikava. 'Glimpses of Muay-Thai' in *The Siamese Art of Buddhatartric Self-*





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then, has become something that everyone desires because it signifies kham pen pu-chai or "the essence of a man", particularly a "real" man.

Although the meaning of the "real" man or look pu-chai tae has probably been redefined throughout the years, its relationship with the muscular body and Muay Thai still holds its significance today. Today the boxing ring is still regarded as the most sacred space reserved for "real" men to display their masculinity and the domination of male power through the male body.¹⁶⁹ Many rules have been set in place to keeping the boxing ring sacred. The most important one is not to let any woman step into the ring, which makes the boxing ring exclusively a male domain. The four sides of the rope functions as a sacred gate, and if any woman crosses it, it will defile the sacredness of the boxing ring and, as implied, the sacredness of the masculine world.

The appearance of Parinya on the scene of Muay Thai has raised a direct question about what is believed to be a game for a "real" man. Before the fight, many already questioned whether he should be allowed to fight, especially in a national stadium, but there was no regulation to rule him out as he was legitimately considered to be a man by birth. As Lt. General Wat Kerdsawang, Lumpini stadium manager, stated: "Parinya has everything that an ordinary man has and obviously he can fight like a man".¹⁷⁰ It is obvious that his biological body, or to be more specific, his sexual organ, had made him have "everything" that "ordinary" men have and thus allowed him to be viewed as

defense, Bangkok: P. Watin Publication, 1989, p. 15.)

169 Thai people believe that spiritual ghosts protect important places such as forests, mountains, as well as the boxing ring and stage for performing. This it is part of the reason why a boxing ring has been regarded as a sacred place.

170 Local Section. *The Nation*. February 26. 1998.





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a man. Although he was allowed to fight, however, he can never be "real" as a "real" man does not wear make-up. A "realness" that is often perceived to come naturally with biological sex has become unsettled, as to be born a man does not automatically render him a real man, and at the same time he cannot identify himself as a real woman either as he was not born one. By being *chai mai jing ying mai tae* (not a "real" man and not a "real" woman) he is considered to be something in between, a *katoey*. A *katoey*, in the general understanding, stands in opposition to masculine men, as the body is marked as "un-masculine" or "less of a man." This is why he is considered to bring humiliation to manhood. It is the humiliation that needs to be punished by patriarchal society, as his opponent, Pongsak Oven Sor Bunma, remarked before the fight: "I will not be shaken by his smile. I will give him a big lesson so that he will learn that Thai boxing is the game of a real man."¹⁷¹ But Parinya, despite being identified with the *katoey*, defied the identification of *katoey*. His muscular body has proved a threat to any masculine man.

In this way, Parinya, who already passed as a man by his biological sex, can also easily become a "real" man by putting on a masculine performance according to society's expectation of the real masculine man in the public space.¹⁷² At the same time, we can also see his opponent, Pongsak, attempting to confirm the meaning of the "real" man by winning the fight against a mock man. Although, if Pongsak had won, it would have been another typical story of a "real" man winning in the game reserved only for a "real" man, Parinya confounded expectations as he went on to win the fight. Instead of being the subject of ridicule and verbal and physical attack by the "real" men as

171 *Bangkok Post*, February 25, 1998.

172 As I have already discussed, Thai people often take more interest in public appearance than in public life, which often allows some homosexual men to behave in public as a heterosexual man and pass as one despite living their private life as a homosexual.





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his kind had always been, he reversed his own role from that of a *katoey* who is supposed to be on the receiving end of violence, to the role of an aggressive masculine man. He eventually won fight probably could probably only have happened in the boxing ring. Thus, the stereotypical image of the effeminate *katoey* was shattered by Parinya's victory and his masculine appearance. Moreover, Parinya's exposure of his powerful masculine body also shifted both the assumptions of "masculine" men and "effeminate" *katoeys*.

Tirelessly attempting to be women, *katoeys* are supposed to be associated with femininity, such as wearing women's clothes, generally acting in a feminine way, and being categorised in the same domain as women, although *katoeys* can never pass as "real" woman because of their biological sex. Although biological sex remains a myth for *katoeys* and a source of curiosity and fascination among the public, to expose it would shatter the image of effeminate *katoeys*. Despite revealing his masculinity by the quality of the muscles in the top half of his body, Parinya still kept his image of *katoey* as he refused to strip naked for the weigh-in. He beat the strict Muay-Thai regulations of by crying when he was asked to undress, and in the end he was allowed to wear underwear. He complained: "The rule is unacceptable. How can I strip in public?"¹⁷³ Having to reveal his male genitals in public would bring him humiliation and undo the myth of *katoey* who is not supposed to be a "real" man. An exception to the rule was made for Parinya as the regulators were won over by Parinya's tears and they allowed him to wear underwear during his weigh-in.

173 Yvonne Bohwoneprasert. Sports Section. *Bangkok Post*. February 25. 1998.





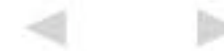
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AMAZING THAILAND: PERFORMING THE SPECTACULAR BODY

It may have been a coincidence that Parinya's appearance on the Muay-Thai scene coincided with the start of two years of "Amazing Thailand" campaigns but the two circumstances were then interrelated as his body was used to create a spectacular event. Instead of being punished for his effeminate appearance in the Muay-Thai arena, he was cheered by the crowd, who were full of bemused admiration, and was touted by the authorities involved with Muay-Thai and tourism officials. As Lt. General Wat Kerdsawang, Lumpini stadium manager, remarked: "In the first year of the Amazing Thailand campaign, Parinya has amazingly brightened up this traditional art of self-defense."¹⁷⁴ He has become the "amazing" subject, which mainly has been produced through his "amazing" body. His body was used to promote Thailand's tourism-campaign regarding the popular national sport of Muay-Thai. Therefore it may seem that Parinya's event has brought more social acceptance for *katoeys* in Thai society as he has been warmly welcomed by the people, particularly the press and the authorities.

However, making him, and the whole event, into a kind of spectacular subject can also be seen as a mechanism in Thai society to reconfirm the heterosexual ideology, by attempting to position the disruption of norms as a spectacular 'other' who cannot be included in the dominant culture. The event was made and perceived as a kind of "performance" which can be excluded from the "real" life of dominant heterosexuals. It has been perceived more or less in the same way as transvestite cabaret shows, which have long been popular among both tourists and Thai people. Over the past two decades, transvestite cabaret shows have become an important part of the construction of

174 Local Section. *The Nation*. February 26. 1998.





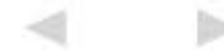
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katoeys' identity and their social status in Thai society. The role of a performer already has a partly *katoey* position in society. In this way, the boxing arena has turned into a theatrical event where people come to take pleasure from a spectacular event that has been created by the other who has been marked as different by his visible body. The masculine sport of boxing has more or less become a national transvestite show where mixed feelings of admiration and ridicule are inseparable, as if one were watching a transvestite cabaret show in the theatre where we see *katoeys* attempting to become "real" women by using their bodies as a testament in achieving this impossibility. Although the stage has moved from the dark seat in the theatre to the national event of a public boxing arena, the bodies of *katoeys* are still undergoing the process of becoming the spectacular other that only exists to confirm the dominant ideology of heterosexuality. They are still bounded in their own limited space of the performing stage, a rather fantasy one, as the street is still reserved for heterosexuals. Besides the dark corners of homosexual clubs or bars, the theatrical stage has become almost the only place where *katoeys* can claim their space in Thai society.

Parinya's spectacular body, the mixture of masculine and feminine, has become the main attraction of the fight, that itself has turned into a performance rather than a masculine sport. The boxing ring has turned into a spectacular site that reduces the significance of the fact that Parinya has laid claim to a *katoey* space in a masculine domain. It has become a performance that can only happen on the stage, not in real life, as the whole fight scene has been heightened to a certain degree by his make-up and the traditional pre-fight dance. The routine pre-fight dance that has to be performed prior to every fight by each boxer in order to appease the spirits of the ring, has taken on a different meaning by Parinya's femininity. The masculine dance performed several times by other boxers has





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become a spectacular scene as he prances, pirouettes, twirls his gloves, and raises his legs around the ring. Getting into the spirit of the fight, one of the early dance steps is called *sao noi pra paeng*, which literally means "young girl puts on powder", where Parinya had to mime the action of putting on the powder in each direction. Instead of giving an impression of masculine actions, as if in preparation to go to war or an important fight, he gave a feminine performance and did exactly what is called *sao noi pra paeng*, similar to a woman giving a performance of Thai classical dance.¹⁷⁵

Although Parinya's event has been treated as a performance in order to reconfirm heterosexual ideology, it has also departed from the performance of transvestite cabaret shows in a way that has also challenged the heterosexual ideology and questioned the notion of performance itself. While *katoeys* in transvestite cabaret shows attempt to locate themselves in one of the gender binaries by undergoing a sex-change operation in order to transform their bodies into "real" women, Parinya has resisted being in either one of the categories as he has maintained his masculine body despite his feminine behaviour. His body has become a contested site, as his masculine body has become a means for Parinya to earn a living and perform masculine acts of boxing, but beyond the boxing arena Parinya's masculine body has become a site where his true desires are explored as he has appeared on several magazine covers in full make-up and women's clothes. Consequently, the assumption that the biological body can be used as a mark of sexual difference has become increasingly unsettled, if not collapsed.

175 Thai classical dance is a very slow and feminine dance that nowadays is performed mostly for tourists.



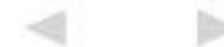


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That masculinity and femininity can be performed through the same body means that each gender has become a parody of the primary gender that has normally been underlined by the difference of the body. It has also become increasingly unclear as it is impossible to separate Parinya's private life from his public one as both can come under the term 'performance'. Parinya's make-up and hair band only function as a suggestion, as it is obviously not about "passing", inasmuch as his make-up looks nothing like a real woman's. Parinya's muscular body does not allow him to pass as a woman and neither does his make-up and feminine behaviour permit him to pass as a man. "Realness" is neither the achieved nor the actual goal of Parinya; instead, his appearance functions as an intervention in the reality. The fantasies he acts out involve cultural anxieties surrounding miscegenation and the queer body. He inhabits and undermines both the image of a masculine man and the feminised woman with a fierce sense of parody. The subject who "passes" can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form. Drag performers strive to perform femininity, and femininity is not exclusively the domain of biological women. The "woman" produced in drag is not a woman, but instead a public misidentification with woman. Both modalities of performing the self, misidentification and "passing", are often strategies of survival.

However the existence of *kratoeys* is important to the construction of Thai masculinity. As Butler argues, drag can be seen as both denaturalisation and reidealisation of heterosexual gender norms.¹ By his look, there is no doubt that he could be identified as a transvestite or a *kratoey* but unlike the typical look of effeminate *kratoey* that is often portrayed in the media, he has the body of a masculine man. The significant point is not only that he, as a *kratoey*, has challenged the masculine space of

1 Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter*. London: Routledge. 1990. p. 125.





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boxing and refused to be bounded in his restricted space of *katoey*, but also, how he has violated the stereotypical image of the *katoey*. I want to go back to visit the scene again and possibly recreate that very process of transgressing the boundary of masculine space and attempt to understand them through my research of katoeys bodies.

PARINYA AND KINNAREE

It was the first time for me to enter into Muay Thai arena. The atmosphere is quite strange and overwhelmed as if I had stepped into a different world. I am no stranger to sport arena but the boxing arena is quite different as it is mainly dominated by men and the atmosphere always intimidating. At least that was my understanding as I have seen from the weekly televised matches. On the day there was a special match featuring the already famous boxer, Parinya. Thai boxing seems to be quite a violence sport as all body parts can consider to be a target. It is definitely a dangerous sport for someone who considers to be a katoey. Despite his appearance Parinya was allowed to go on a fight and perform a kind of Thai classical dance that imitate the women activity of dressing up. It has become a way for feminine roles to reassert into patriarchy dominated space. It was told to help the boxers to concentrate and more importantly to pay respect for the guardian spirits of Muay Thai as well as for the master or trainer. The way Parinya did the dance was quite different from the others as he displayed a feminine act in a rather excessive way to the amusement among the audience. With the excessive act he negates himself from being both a masculine man and a feminine katoey because in that moment he has transformed himself to something different from himself. It has become a scene of the past where katoey or someone with feminine behaviours performed the role of spiritual leader in which the dance was part of the ritual. It was more like





Re-Reading The Kratoey's body

a fantasy space rather than the real one. The scene that can never be happened in real life but can happen only within the four sides of the ring just the same way of filmic images. The boxing ring has become a space where fantasy and desire can act out. It is also a space where dream can come true as Muay Thai has become popular among young kids in the province in order to earn the money. It has become a route of escape whether from poverty or from the humiliation that one may face out of the ring. It recently has become a space for katoey to such as Parinya to realise his dream of having enough money to have a sex change operation which he eventually had in 2000.

The spectators were fascinated by the scene as if in the darkroom of the theatre. Mulvey points out to one of the pleasure offers by the cinema, a scopophilia or 'pleasure in looking'.² Refer to Freud, Mulvey suggests that 'he associates scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to controlling and curious gaze.'³ One of his example is the children's curiosity about other people's genital and bodily functions, about the presence or absence of the penis.⁴ The latter had been a case for Parinya for sometimes before he had an actual operation. It had been a subject of interest and an intense one as he stepped into the boxing ring. He had become an object of the gaze, of looking in the same way that women have been. Through the short video, *Kinnaree*, half woman-half bird - the taboo object of desire, I attempt to portray such process that once. By being there, I realised it was the music and the crowd that allow such a violence sport to be a spectacle and the beat that control both objects (Parinya and female dancers). I have tried to recreate the

2 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Contemporary Film Theory* (ed. Anthony Easthope), Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Limited., 1993, pp. 113-114.

3 *ibid.*, p. 114.

4 *ibid.* v. 114.





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scene by juxtaposing Parinya's fight with the two types of Thai music that are used in different kinds of spaces; one is used in boxing match and the other is used in Thai traditional dance that mainly perform by women. It is the relationship between the bearer of the look and the looker, the object of desire and the gaze, the hunt and the hunter (in Kinnaree tales), etc. that somewhere in-between can turn physical body into the realm of desire and fantasy that is both real and imagined.





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FILMIC REPRESENTATION: RE-FRAMING CINEMATIC SPACE SAUNA⁵/DAY

"In the darkness of the corridors, countless tiny rooms, faceless crowds. Hsiao-Kang opens and closes the doors and finally goes into one of the cubicles. The next moment, amidst the darkness and what is supposedly a sexual encounter between two strangers, the light is switched on we then see clearly the face of Hsiao-Kang's father, and in the corner of the same room we finally discover Hsiao-Kang."

The space of 'corridors' in the above scene from Tsai Ming Liang's film *The River* (1996, Taiwan) is one of the best examples of the kinds of 'spaces' that have often been portrayed in queer Asian cinema since the second half of the 1990s. The corridors have become a kind of in-between space located between what is public and private space, moral and immoral, tradition and modernity, heterosexual and homosexual, which is accentuated in the film. The space of the sauna that has formed part of homosexual culture has now been superimposed and exposed by the space of the family, as represented through the relationship between father and son.⁶ The filmic representation makes it

5 One needs to understand the different roles and signification of the sauna in different locales and time. Particularly in recent years, besides it being a place for family and relaxation, the implications of the sauna have changed in many parts of the world and in society. It has become part of the homosexual subculture, as well as bathhouse, park, gym, public toilet, car park, café and many other places, which have been the focus of the 1990s queer study in constructing homosexual identity and community (Sanders 1996, Bell and Valentine 1995, Ingram and Retter 1997).

6 Chris Berry has observed the importance of the (Confucian) family and its close relationship with homosexuals in East Asian Cinema. He further suggests that it is quite impossible to consider homosexual identity outside the family.





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possible for us to witness the encounter between father and son which has now brought disruption to the once concealed and restricted meaning of the homosexual space, and at the same time has disrupted the authority figure of the father in the context of family relations by the confrontation and involvement with homosexuality, the forbidden love between father and son.⁷ Towards the end of the scene, after Hsiao-Kang has run out of the room, his father stands motionless by the open door connecting with the corridor. The corridor has become a kind of gap, an extension that allows us to re-configure the meaning of both spaces, homosexual and family. The now fragile and weakening representation of the once celebrated heterosexual space of the family has been affected by several contemporary conditions, including homosexual desires, as signified by the last shot of this scene. This mixture of old and new, public and private, hetero and homo, moral and immoral, tradition and modernity and so on, I believe, has created an in-between space that is not fixed in meaning and accommodates multiple functions that at times contest the existing ideology.

This is the kind of space that I would like to call attention to and can be witnessed in some of the films in queer Asian cinema, such as *Vive l'Amour*, *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (Tsai Ming-Liang, 2002), *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-wai, 2000) and *Tropical Malady* (Apichartpong Weerasethkul, 2004); spaces such as those of an unsold apartment left over from the economic crash in Asia in 1997, a large theatre showing local films, that went out of favour when mini-theatres spread across the city, a transitional space such as a corridor, or Hong Kong as a country, a space of the real and imagined such as the forest in *Tropical Malady*, etc. These are spaces with no particular function or meaning.

⁷ Fran Martin suggests in a similar manner that while this scene has suggested the ability to dominate and encompass all social spaces, it also suggests the dissolution of 'the original form of authority'. (Martin, 2003)





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They are more like a void to be filled with unspeakable desires, at times homosexual desires, which enable many possibilities to take place as the old meanings, such as that of the traditional space of the family, are deconstructed and superimposed by new meanings in the age of globalisation. It is a period when capitalisation and modernisation are taking place at tremendous speed in traditional societies such as East and Southeast Asia. The inconsistency of developments within the city has resulted in certain kinds of gaps or voids, both physical and psychological. I have discussed some of the physical ones in Chapter One, such as park areas, the space under the bridge, and the space in the vicinity of the Royal Palace, although there are spaces that cannot be seen.

Though it is probably difficult to locate and recognise these spaces in the rush of everyday life, visual representations have made it possible to see more clearly what may have been invisible and hidden. Moreover, in this contradiction between 'absence' and 'presence', filmic images are in themselves already an in-between space. As Ackbar Abbas remarks on the significance of visual representation: "the more abstract the space, the more important the image becomes, and the more dominant becomes the visual as a mode".⁸ It also makes visible the embodiment of the organisation of codes, signs, ideologies, and structural constraints that we experience in everyday life and bring them to the fore, which may help us to unravel the complex structure that works within society. What concerns me here is not to find the in-between spaces that I believe are made evident in the recent emergence of a group of filmic representations in Asia, but to reveal the structure underlying these in-between spaces, and the relationship between what is presented on screen and what is beyond

8 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 9.





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our field of vision (the known and the unknown, visible and invisible, seen and unseen, etc.) which underpins these filmic representations, as well as their spatial organisation and representation as a whole.

The following questions inform the readings in this paper: How these filmic representations that epitomise the interplay between what is 'visible' – or 'presence' (shown on screen) – and what is 'invisible' or 'absence' (beyond out field of vision) structure this in-between space; what is left for each individual to construct their own subjectivity amidst this breaking-up and blurring of the boundaries. However, I do not intend to clarify or decide upon 'what is' or 'what is not' the in-between space, but instead to make use of this undecidable moment, an ambiguous space, to make possible a multi-reading and understanding no longer trapped in the dichotomous way of thinking.

Ultimately, through the reading of the in-between spaces in Asian filmic representation, I hope to spark off some ideas in relation to my overall theme of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* and how the filmic or visual representation might assist us to see or look differently at the space and also discover a new one. It is also an attempt to understand the changes in filmic images in response to the rapid transformations that have occurred over the past decade up until recent times, such as the 1997 British handover of Hong Kong China's Special Administrative Regions, and the increasing visibility of homosexuals in the public sphere across Asia. As Berry (1994) further points out, not only do we need to understand these changing spaces but also the way in which we position ourselves in them. He suggests that in the midst of the ever-changing identities and landscapes, a two-dimensional





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printed map is no longer sufficient. We need to “demand a more fluid and fragmented understanding of subject positions”.⁹ A new topographical mechanism is needed in response to the voices of the subaltern, as Berry writes:

For the real risk of disempowerment for those who claim the ‘subject’ position in the old topographical mechanism of dichotomous desire and the real obstacle to breaking out of the ‘other’ position do not lie in the ‘subjects’ hearing ‘others’ speak. Rather, it lies in hanging on to the old mechanism, for if the ‘other’ is already speaking and acting, then the metaphor is already bankrupt.¹⁰

While keeping Berry’s suggestion in mind, I shall attempt to address the films mentioned above as an instance of how they made possible the reading of in-between spaces where love, which also the subject of these films, could be re-imagined in relation to homosexuality. Although the films have been made in different locations – Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand – it is also important to note here that while attending to both the historical and the specificity of the local text, the way the local has been marked by translocal interaction also needs to be considered in the overall reading of these films.¹¹

9 Chris Berry, *A Bit of the Side: East-West Topographies of Desire*, Sydney: EmPress, 1994, p. 14.

10 *ibid.*, p. 16.

11 As has also been remarked by Fran Martin and Peter Jackson (Martin, 2003).





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AN ALTERNATIVE SPACE FOR THE LOVE RE-IMAGINED¹²

Disappearance, according to Paul Virilio, is a product of speed and a technological interface in which the physical dimension has been distorted and deprived and changes our relationship to the world. What we are experiencing is a breakdown in both time and space through high-speed transportation, electronic machines, mobile phones, etc, that shorten all distances and time and put all the chronological orders into disarray. The appearance of any material forms – painting, sculpture – has been replaced by the emergence of photography, followed by cinematography and video. We have now entered into “the realm of an aesthetic of disappearance where the persistence is now only retinal”, a cognitive form of perception.¹³ Contrary to the aesthetics of appearance where the images only persist because of the existence of their mediums, now the concrete mediums no longer existed but only the retinal persistency. While there is the evidence of film reels, the ‘real’ of the reality is quickly fading away and what is left and matters is only the persistency of retinal images as they try to recapture and present what has already passed or disappeared. The dialectics between the two, appearance and disappearance, is what constitutes our contemporary society, where the appearance is in demand to make up for the lack or loss of security that comes under threat in the fast-developing society, but at the same time the disappearance is also needed in order to replace or substitute for what is threatening to disappear. This is the situation that is being faced all over the world, particularly in the “developing” world such as in Asia.

The dialectics between what appears and disappears became even more symptomatic in the case of Hong Kong during the period of 1997 handover which marked the end of colonialism and the beginning

12 Taken from Fran Martin as she attempts to describe the alternative space that features in Tsai Ming-Liang's *Vive l'Amour*.

13 Interview with Chris Dercon. in *Interview with Paul Virilio* (ed. John Armitage). London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2001. p. 77.





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of 'quasi-colonialism' but with a twist where the colonised state is no longer in the dependent subaltern position but actually more technologically advanced than and economical superior to the colonising state.¹⁴ The simple equation of colonised/coloniser is unprecedentedly disrupted. It is an on-going process of displacement and reversal "when an 'older' but still operative politics of national legitimacy and geophysical boundaries comes into conflict with a 'newer' politics of global flows, information, and the devalorisation of physical boundaries"¹⁵. Abbas uses the term 'space of disappearance' to describe the state of Hong Kong in this particular period when its people are searching for lost identities and cultures. Abbas compares the state of Hong Kong's culture before the 1970s as perceived by its people to Sigmund Freud's term 'negative hallucination' in his essay on Wilhelm Jensen's *Gravida*, or a 'reverse hallucination', a refusal to see what is there. Everything had been perceived by its people as imported from elsewhere, whether Mainland China, Taiwan or the West, but then they came to realise that what they had would all soon disappear in the midst of accelerated economic growth and political instability, all will, then, soon disappear.¹⁶ What was once considered the other is again part of the construction of the today's self. With the fear of losing what they have in the last decade or so, the radical surge of its own culture has turned a 'reverse hallucination' into a 'culture of disappearance', "whose appearance is posited on the imminence of its disappearance,"¹⁷ as is shown in many forms of visual representation, particularly the most popular one, Hong Kong cinema, such as the films of Wong Kar-wai, Ann Hui, and Stanley Kwan, where the

14 See Ackbar Abbas (1997).

15 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 4.

16 *ibid.*, p. 6-7.

17 *ibid.* p. 7.





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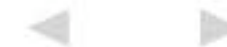
search for new images of representation is made possible and “all its anxieties and contradictions can be read”¹⁸.

Rey Chow describes these searches for the lost past as ‘nostalgia’ that features significantly in the filmic representation in Hong Kong as well as elsewhere in the developing world. But nostalgia, as we know, the longing for the past that we can not return to, seems to appear differently when “the omnipresence of real estate speculation means not only that ‘original’ historic places are being demolished regularly, but also that the new constructions that replace them often do not stand long enough – to acquire the feeling of permanence that in turn gives way to nostalgia – before they too are demolished”.¹⁹ In turn, instead of longing for the past through objects or sites, the nostalgia is “working by manipulation of temporality rather than by simple projection of lack/loss onto space. In other words, nostalgia is not triggered by the objects anymore but by the absence of the object or the space of disappearance. If and when the past is to be (re)collected, it is (re)collected in compressed forms, forms that are fantasies of time.”²⁰ These fantasies of time are suitably explored through filmic images where time can be manipulated without any restrictions through the techniques of cameras and editing. Hence, through different techniques of representation, these nostalgic images are concerned with temporality, where intense and abstract images are created that differ from the classical cinema, similar to what Gilles Deleuze would call a “time-image”, where the aberrant movement is not taking place in a unified time-space (unlike images such as dreams, memories,

18 ibid., p. 17.

19 Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998) p. 135.

20 ibid., p. 135.





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and hallucination) but in direct images of time where the aberrant movement becomes the norm, which may cause many undecidable moments that cannot easily be identified or understood.²¹ In this image, it can be an alternative space and time through which we can re-imagine our identity and re-discover what may disappear, invisible, or what we may have refused to see in the past, or what may have been rendered as false. But instead of the space of the re-imagined, could these filmic spaces of nostalgia be only the projection of the romance of the past, of treasured memories, or only an easy escape route from the imperfect present to a perfect dream or fantasy? Could this perhaps be, as Fran Martin suggests, an index of the need for a new kind of social space, a space for love re-imagined which filmic images make possible, bringing unlikely elements of love, ideology, subjectivity together which may come into conflict in everyday life?

Amidst the recent wave of nostalgia films in Hong Kong, Wong Kar-wai's first film after the handover, *In the Mood for Love*, best sums up present-day Hong Kong and its identity and culture in the space of disappearance. It is the story of an illicit and oppressive love affair between two neighbours in the Hong Kong Shanghainese community, who discover that their respective spouses are having an affair. It is set in the 1960s, which arguably marked the beginning of Hong Kong's post-colonial modernity as the Hong Kong House of Commons officially reviewed its post-war position.²² It is a critical time of transition and transformation, as seen through various characters moving in and out of Hong Kong and in the occupations of two main characters who signify Hong Kong's place in

21 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The time-image* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), p. Xii.

22 Yue has also further suggested that it was at the same time that Hong Kong acquired its modern attitude of dedication to money-making, which was the beginning of Hong Kong's economic success today. ("In the Mood for Love: Intersections of Hong Kong Modernity" in *Chinese Films in focus: 25 New Takes* (ed. Chris Berry. London: British Film Institute, 2003). p. 132.





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modernity and capitalism: a secretary in a shipping company and a reporter whose duties took take him to different places in Asia.

However, it could be said that the film is about the nostalgia of lost love in and of the past, that we cannot go back to but only revisit through the images, and in this case the film itself becomes the ultimate object of nostalgia which makes revisiting the past possible by the reconstruction and imitation of the past. In other words, the film has been created in such a way that we can project our loss of the past and confirms the existence of the object of desire that may or may not have existed in reality, a substitution of reality with images or representation. This point is made clear through the film's use of roleplay between the two characters (Mr Chow or Chow Mo-wan, played by Tony Leung, and Mrs Chan, played by Meggie Chung), which also functions significantly as a means for the two characters to develop their romance. The simple quest of "just wanted to know how it started" of both characters leads them to construct the world of fiction, to re-imagine what might have been in the story of the supposedly real and original relationship between Mrs Chow and Mr Chan. It may remind us of the phrase "let's start over again" from Bo-wing, Leslie Cheung's character in *Happy Together* as Rey Chow views as expresses a desire to go back to the primal scene which often reveals a kind of lack or loss of a primal scene which might only be fictional, but just imagining its existence has already made us whole, the unity of the primal scene.²³ By inventing their world of fiction, they create a substitution for the 'whole' that they have imagined in the relationship between their respective spouses. The relationship between the two illicit couples creates the structure of the film, which depends very much upon the interplay between the binary oppositions, and I list some

23 Rey Chow, "Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together*" in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* (eds. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo). (London: Routledge, 2001). pp. 233-235.





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examples below:

The relationship between

Mr Chow& Mrs Chan

Fiction
Present
Visible
Public
Tradition
Culture
Lack

Mrs Chow & Mr Chan

Real
Absent
Invisible
Private
Desire
Nature
Whole

The romance between Mr Chow and Mrs Chan starts with only a fictional-roleplay, without doing anything that opposes the traditions or norms of the society. Therefore it is allowed to be visible in public, unlike the affair between MrsChow and Mr Chan, whom we only see in fragments; they seem to be invisible in the framing of the shots, and are finally totally absent from the film. However, as the relationship between Mr Chow and Mrs Chan developes we become gradually unable to separate fiction and reality. We do not know exactly what is going on between them, as in room 2046 of the hotel where they meet up, their actions become a blur. The images of the two protagonists are now often fragmented or unclear reflections in the mirror. These transitions between real and fictional are also signalled by Mr Chow's attempts to move away from the real routine of working in a newspaper



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to writing martial arts fiction with Mrs. Chan. Once again, in their relationship they both depend upon the fiction they create in order to be whole.

In the final stages of their relationship, the 'rehearsal' of many versions where they substitute their respective husband and wife has become so real, but at the same time this real at the end is seen as "just a rehearsal", as in their last scene together when Mr Chow asks Mrs Chan to pretend to ask him not to see her again, and not as a substitution of her husband but as himself. But when she becomes too upset, believing this to be real, he tells her to not take it too seriously and that it is not real but just a rehearsal, as he often reminds her. While they attempt to make their relationship become "real", their relationship is, again, thrown back to the realm of representation, in which they try to recreate, to imitate the supposedly real relationship between Mr Chan and Mrs Chow, which can never become the absolutely real. The increasing presence of their relationship on the screen, in contrast to the increasing absence of Mr Chan and Mrs Chow from the screen, can never sustained if Mr Chan and Mrs Chow are to be totally absent from the film. It is the interplay between the two, the real and the representation, and the absence and the presence, that indefinite attempt to replace each other, that allows the gap to occur and exist, the ambiguous space in-between the binary opposition, where we can no longer separate the real and the representation, the real and the fictional, and so on. In this ambiguity, the audience is left to fill that space or gap with their fantasy, their dreams and desires (the elements that allow us to imagine the relationship between Mr Chow and Mrs Chan, which might be illicit, immoral and cannot be directly represented in the film), which are often supported by the use of mise-en-scène and the prominent use of transitional spaces like a corridor, a stairway, alleyway, the corner of a building. These spaces are often represented in the



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film as a space for daydreaming or a fantasy space which, through Freud, Laplanche and Pontalis, suggests that the world of fantasy is "to be located exclusively within the domain of opposition between subjective and objective, between an inner world, where satisfaction is obtained through illusion, and an external world, which gradually, through the medium of perception, asserts the supremacy of the reality principle."²⁴ Through the use of slow motion or static-like images where there is almost no action from the characters, such as in the hotel corridors where each protagonist always stands motionless amidst splendid décor, costumes and colour scheme, the images are rendered almost like photograph. These images in a way interrupt the narrative flow and instead create a kind of mood reminiscent of dreams.

Places such as hallways, staircases, and corridors also become the main focus of the film, where we see people constantly moving and passing through. It is also where strangers and acquaintances meet each other and move on, in a similar manner to what takes place in airport lounges, hotel corridors, or ultimately in port cities like Hong Kong, where we often interact with people and finally move on without any attachment. They are not really part of an interior or private realm, nor are they really a public space, as they also allow a kind of close interaction and communication between strangers that may not be possible in the public space. They also provide a space for the characters who are often trapped on the inside, as we can see through the framing of space. Moreover, they also signify the kind of illicit and oppressive love that does not belong in any particular space, inside or outside. It is the spaces of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* that allow an oppressive desire to function.

24 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality in Formations of Fantasy*, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan. (London: Routledge. 1986). p.6.





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The characters are often framed through a window or doorframe, and they find it hard, if not impossible, to break through the frame and release themselves into the outside world. The inside, which the film represents through the immigrant Shanghainese community and has been given the signifier "Shanghai has returned to its former status as the more 'senior' city in the Chinese cultural imaginary,"²⁵ overpowers the characters. While the outside, which is arguably absent from most of the film, except for the noodle stall and an empty street, is often seen as a space of degradation or in opposition to the Chinese traditions that are upheld inside, as Mrs Suen attempts to warn Mrs Chan after her recent outing. Therefore, the only way for the characters to break through to the outside is by way of those absent places in the film which we hear of but never visit, like Japan where both Mrs Chow and Mr Chan often find themselves, or Singapore to which Mr Chow finally escapes. However, towards the end, the relative power position between the inside and the outside or tradition (Chineseness) and modernity (the West) is implicitly altered, as the inside fails to capture and make sense of the outside world of constant changes and flee itself from a certain privileged position in the society, as in the case of Mrs Suen and Mr Koo, the landlords of Mrs Chan and Mr Chow, who finally find themselves emigrating and escaping from the uncertainty that surrounds and governs Hong Kong.

The prominent appearance of corridors or similar kinds of transitional spaces are not only featured in Hong Kong or in Wong Kar-wai's films but also appear elsewhere in contemporary Chinese cinema and in other 'developing' countries. Tsai Ming Liang's films also feature corridor spaces, which has become one of his trademarks, appearing in every film. In the film *Vive l'Amour*, he extends the use

25 Audrey Yue, "In the Mood for Love: Intersections of Hong Kong Modernity" in *Chinese Films in focus: 25 New Takes* (ed. Chris Berry. London: British Film Institute. 2003). p. 132.





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of corridors as a transitional space to the empty apartment, which is established in the very first shot where we see a key hanging from the door in an empty corridor, which is taken away by the out-of-focus Xiao-Kang character. The empty apartment, with no real use or function in an excessive world of economic prosperous Taipei, as seen through the window pane of the apartment, has become a space of transition for people to prepare for their participation in a fast-changing world, a void waiting to be filled in an foreseen future. It is a kind of temporary space for the three characters: Mei-mei, an estate agent, Arong, a street vendor of women's clothing, and Xiao-Kang, a crematorium salesman, where they are passing by each other and finally interact; simultaneously represented in the scene where Arong is having sex with Mei-mei while Xiao-Kang, who has already developed an affection for Arong, hides under the same bed. The apartment, which is supposed to function as a space of home or family, has changed its meaning and created what Fran Martin suggests as "new spaces of possibility opening up within the constrained conditions of everyday life in the dystopian cities of Taiwanese (post)modernity."²⁶

According to Martin, the relationship between the two spaces, family (*jia* – a term that means both 'family' and 'home') and homosexuality (*tongxinglian*), often considered to be in conflict with each other, as the requirement of *jia*, family reproduction, has made *tongxinglian* a threat to the reproductive heterosexual *jia*, are no longer opposed each other. Instead of the breaking down of a traditional or family space, it is an 'emptying out' of the *jia*, allowing for a new space of possibility built upon the ruin and decay of family spaces and the possibility of re-thinking its signification in

26 Fran Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), p. 180.





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relation to the recent transformations of Taiwan's social and cultural spaces,²⁷ as in the scene where Xiao Kang attempts to make the empty apartment a home that he may want to share with Arong and he shares a hotpot meal with her as a "normal" family would do. Instead of breaking out and completely disappearing from the *jia*, the film, through the space of apartment, leaves some hope for a new imagined space that we may not realise in the present condition but may soon approaching – 'the space of love re-imagined' – yet it is real and can be found within the confined spaces of the filmic images.²⁸ It "suggests that the location from which the tangled questions arising from the inevitable imbrications of patrilineal family with homosexual knowledge might be answered remains a hypothetical location: imaginable, but as yet outside our field of vision."²⁹

The world of speed and displacement, where people are constantly moving around, buildings are being built and demolished in a short space of time, and there is an overload of information technology, images or visual representation, has created confusion and a displacement of space and time in our sensory motor system that we are continually attempting to get a grip on in order to construct our fixed and stable identity as a way of surviving and making sense of the world. Nevertheless, it often fails because identities, as we can see from the above examples, are multiplying and fluid. Filmic representations such as *In the Mood for Love* and *Vive l'Amour* have questioned the fixed identities that have been framed by dominant ideologies through norms, religion, tradition, etc. The space

27 Fran Martin, "Vive L'Amour: Eloquent Emptiness" in *Chinese Films in focus: 25 New Takes* (ed. Chris Berry, London: British Film Institute, 2003), p. 176. See also Chang Hsiao-hung ("An Erotic Map of Taipei" in *Queer Desire: Gender and Sexuality*, Taipei: Lianhe Wenxue, 1996), p. 78-107) for further discussion of the 'emptying out' of *jia*.

28 Fran Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2003, p. 180.

29 *ibid.* p. 179.





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of the corridor, as I suggest above, is one in which we can learn to question any fixed and stable notion of identity, dominant ideology or even the status of images themselves, among other things. This space is not only a space of transition in terms of geography or architecture but it can also, as shown in the above films be a space where past, present and future can meet and where our love and desire have to be re-imagined in this new condition of space, as seen in Ming Liang's *Goodbye Dragon Inn*.

Goodbye Dragon Inn is a film about cinema itself. The film centres on the last day of a second-grade theatre showing the old kung-fu film *Dragon Inn*. In an era of intense urban development, such a grand place is fast becoming part of the memorabilia of the past. It will soon be demolished and replaced with a department store with a multiplex cinema. These kinds of cinemas are often situated on the fringes of the city centre, and the films they show are often old-cinema and pornography. They no longer have any real economic function in the contemporary world. They are usually frequented by those who are considered the other in the city, such as homosexuals or those who have no function in the urban economy, such as old people and children who come to pass the time. Their only real function now is becoming a space for unfulfilled desire, whether the desire for a lost past that cannot be recaptured in the outside world, or homosexual desires that make use of the dark corridors and theatre to find someone. The spaces have become a kind of void, leftovers from the transition to globalisation and modernisation that is also taking place in many other big cities in Asia. It is an attempt to hang on to their roots. They are trapped in the moment where the past is fading away while the future is not yet there. It is a kind of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* space that is best demonstrated by the second-grade cinema, a space where cinema functions as an in-between space





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in its most concrete form.

While through *In the Mood For Love* and *Vive l'Amour* I have discussed alternative spaces in films, and through *Goodbye Dragon Inn* I have tried to look at film in space, a cinema, in the last part I want to discuss film as a space where the boundaries between real and imagined are more seamlessly intertwined than in any other medium because of its visual expression and its dialectic mechanism between objects and images. Perhaps it is the most abstract space but also an important and creative one that often guides us through the contemporary conditions that we live in. The space of queer Asian cinema can be the most familiar and the strangest one at the same time. It can transcend experience, from the most intimate to the most alienated, from the most real to the imagined, from the familiar corner of the city to the exotic deep dark of the tropical jungle, from the sphere of the known to the unknown. It is a mixture of all these suggested things that I want to demonstrate in *Tropical Malady*.

From dark urban theatre to dark tropical jungle in Apichartpong Weerasethakul's Tropical Malady

The human eye, and equally the photographic lens, acts from a particular position and from there can take in only such portions of the field of vision as are not hidden by things in front.

Rudolf Arnheim, Film As Art, p. 19

It is in the nature of film, characterised by Rudolf Arnheim as "neither absolutely two-dimensional nor absolutely three-dimensional, but something between" resulting from the projection of the three-



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dimensional movement onto the screen surface, that we are reminded of the 'reality' we perceive on screen as partial and fictitious.³⁰ There is always the space beyond the four sides of the screen as well as the surface of the screen both behind and in front of the position of the camera, as many film theorists attempt to point out the different aspects of film space. Among them, Stephen Heath draws our attention to two main spaces associated with film: one is the space 'in frame' and the other is the space 'out of frame' or the space beyond the limits of the frame.³¹ It is the distinction between the two spaces, in other words between the reality presented on screen and the reality of the world beyond the screen, that has always been the subject of discussion by many scholars. Jurij Lotman, a Russian semiotician, reminds us that there is always a contradiction between what is within the confined space of the screen and the unlimited space of the world to which cinema inevitably refers to.³² The relationship between the space on and off screen is also emphasised by Andre Gardies, a French narratologist, who suggests that it is the cultural knowledge the spectators embody which allows them to perceive a spatial dimension beyond the filmic one.³³

It is in this in-between space of what is present and absent from the screen that the specific meaning of each film takes place. It is also the exchange between the two, the presence and absence, that is the nature of cinema itself, as is also pointed out by Christian Metz, a major film theorist; the more

30 Rudolf Arnheim, *Film As Art*, London: Faber, 1969, p. 20.

31 Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space' in *Contemporary Film Theory* (ed. Antony Easthope), London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1993, p. 73.

32 Lieve Spaas, 'Center, Periphery and Marginality in the films of Alain Tanner' in *Space in European Cinema* (ed. Myrto Konstantarakos), Exeter: Intellect Books, 2000, p. 152.

33 *ibid.* p. 152.





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vividly the images are presented, the more it insists that the object is actually lacking; in other words, it is made 'present' in the mode of 'absence'.³⁴ It is also precisely in this between space of presence and absence that I believe at the heart of *Tropical Malady* and the key to its understanding.

After I left the cinema and tried to organise my thoughts on the film *Tropical Malady*, directed by Apichartpong Weerasethkul, I felt even more confused trying to understand it in a normal causal way. What did the dark screen in the middle of the film mean to the seemingly different stories, despite the same lead characters? Is it a talking monkey that provides a key understanding to the film? The questions go on and on. Despite the confusion over the narrative, it was one of the most enticing experiences I have ever had watching films. Was it the darkness in the dense jungle with a flickering sunshine that lured me, as the darkness of the cinema itself has lured me and the audience for over a century with the flickering light on the screen? Perhaps it is in that darkness and the moment of uncertainty of knowing/not knowing that *Tropical Malady* holds its power.

In my first encounter with *Tropical Malady*, the film seemed structured on the binary opposition, by positing two different stories, a love story between two men and the story of a soldier hunting a monster who is capable of transforming itself between a human and a tiger. It is also a story of light and darkness, of nature and humans, of life and fairytales, of heterosexual and homosexual, of men and women, and much more. However, instead of focusing on the binary opposition, Weerasethkul expressed in an interview his interest in 'experimenting' by putting two different things, the two opposite poles, side by side, despite the known path and result. By doing so, Weerasethkul invites

34 Christian Metz. *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. London: Macmillan. 1982. p. 44.





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us to go on an unknown journey to find the meaning between the binary opposition. However, we need to ask further in which ways or which strategies the film has attempted and employed to move beyond the binary opposition. What really happened in the in-between? We are encouraged to look for the void, the absence, the gap reminding us all of the limitation of visual images, and to the more important question of our vision and knowledge, which I attempt to raise through the reading of the film.

Despite the element of homosexuality in the film, it cannot easily be said that *Tropical Malady* is a homosexual film. It uses homosexual elements as a major creative force, like many other prominent films made by filmmakers such as Derek Jarman and Jean Cocteau, where homosexual elements are pushing the boundaries of filmmaking itself. It can also be used as a good example to draw attention to the contemporary conditions of Thai homosexuality which have rarely been brought up as an independent entity that is different from the katoey, or transvestite, who often represents homosexuals in popular media. In presenting the seemingly simple love story between two men in a traditional space such as family, military, folklore tales, villages, instead of the usual urban space and the rather exclusive space of clubs, bars and sauna, the film attempts to rewrite and rearrange the meaning of homosexuality and its spaces as well as the traditional spaces that represent hegemonic ideology. At the same time, the intervention of these two contradictory spaces within the narrative space of *Tropical Malady* provides a way of reconciling and gesturing towards the alternative approach to the problematic of representing the Other with references to the philosophy of Buddhism and Thai ideology.





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Furthermore, as Heath points out, film space is organised by the logic of narrative, and *Tropical Malady*, with its complicated and multi-layered narratives, whether folklore, legend, fable or memory, exposes and questions not only the filmic space but filmic narrative as a whole.³⁵ In that way, the film challenges us to pose an even more significant question: given that our knowledge depends upon the narrative in organising data and information, what can we believe to be true if the narrative itself is being questioned? We are now entering what Martin Reiser and Andrea Zapp describe as an "age of narrative chaos"³⁶ that poses an urgent need in every field to reconsider what has been dominant or what is supposed to be a grand narrative or knowledge as a whole.

The light, the dark, and the beyond

If you close your eyes, you only see the darkness. But if you look into the darkness for a while you will see the images.

*Apichartpong Weerasethakul (interview in Bioscope magazine)*³⁷

The cinema and the cinematic experience are very much dependent upon the contrasting elements of darkness and lightness to make visible the images and how we may perceive those images on the screen. The most obvious relationship that has been discussed throughout the history of cinema is the darkness of the theatre and the light that goes through the projector that projects the images onto the screen to produce a dream-like quality of cinematic representation that makes possible

35 Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space' in *Contemporary Film Theory* (ed. Antony Easthope), London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1993, p. 88.

36 *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, eds. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp, London: British Film Institute, 2004, p. XXV.

37 *Bioscope*. 31 (June. 2004). pp. 42-47.





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the relationship between cinema and subconscious that has been explored in psychoanalysis. The process of filming itself or the process of image-making also depends on these two elements. The light that passes through the film chemical bases in each interval of camera mechanism has created the strip of light and dark that when passing through the projector at a particular speed will create a continuous image that we see on the screen. However, we often overlook the importance of the dark that makes possible the images. It often gets lost through the speed, another significant factor, to make the light appear in continuous movement and to make possible the illusion of reality. While the images are moving through the succession of speed, at 24 images per second, the eyes can no longer capture the 'gap' or darkness between each fragmented image. What interests me in *Tropical Malady* is the way in which the speed has been slowed down and disrupted to reveal the darkness that has always been a significant part of the process in filmic representation, and possibly revealing the mechanism of visible machine that always produces the gap/the rupture/the slippage between what is supposedly real and the images which underlie all kinds of representation.

However, it is no longer the question of the nature of representation that *Tropical Malady* raises but also the larger question of our limits of vision/of our eyes. The unusually long period of darkness in the middle of the film does not only reveal the darkness but also exposes our limits of vision, that we are unable to see in the dark. According to Peggy Phelan, "the physiological understanding of vision, like both the psychoanalytic conception of the gaze and the technologies of aesthetics, is also a theory of loss and distortion."³⁸ We are unable to perceive fully the supposedly real (as with the camera that is only capable of capturing partial images of the real).³⁹ We are only able to see with

38 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 14

39 *ibid.* p. 14.





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our organic eyes at a particular speed, movement, and spectrum of light and colours. Apichartpong takes out our ability to see as he intentionally puts in the dark frames, being there nothing to see or being there something we see but are unable to perceive, as if to prepare us for a walk into the unknown space of darkness (the forest, the subconscious) in the latter part of the film.

It is the light that creates such images and reality. The light has long been associated with the power to see (and to be seen), to look, to investigate, to survey, and possibly to enlighten and so on. And it is this power to see that we witness from the very first scene when the soldiers are taking turns having their pictures taken with the corpse. The corpse has become a trophy, like a precious hunted animal proudly presented by hunters. The photograph becomes a witness to the hunter's triumph. The human being without vision, his/her ability to see, is like a corpse that can become an object of the look. It is the same inability that we experience in the middle of the film. It is the light that allows photography to take place, and it is this light that starts the film with an authority to freeze the reality. Because of the joyfulness and playfulness of the soldiers taking the pictures, we never question why the body is there in the first place. Representation seems much more important than reality here, until later, when the lights have gone off in the middle of the film and we realise what is lacking.

After the long period of darkness, we begin to see some images. We may question our perception of whether the long period of darkness contained any images. What we think is invisible and where nothing existed may actually contain images. That something is beyond our vision, beyond the reach of our organic eyes, does not mean that it does not exist. If we look more carefully, we may see





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what was once lost and what we were unable to see in normal circumstances where the light, speed, technology, and various powers control what we see. We are forced to go on the journey of an unexplored unknown where we no longer hold the power or the force to control. In other words, our power of seeing that comes with the light as a spectator is taken away, just as in the case of Keng, who is in many ways forced into the jungle to find the monster/Tong, if the monster/Tong could be connected to the first part, departs from Keng and walks away from his lover into the darkness. With the little light and the dark, maze-like path covered with trees, we no longer have a clear visibility of what is going on around us. From the position of the onlooker – both Keng and the audience – we become the bearer of the look from the things that we cannot see. It is possible to say that we are afraid and controlled by the invisible; as Marianne Moore puts it: “the power of the visible is the invisible.”⁴⁰

On this journey of the unknown that used to be invisible, an absence, and the lost part of the images that we are unable to capture, there is no ready map or knowledge to guide us through. It is not a question of them being visible or invisible, present or absent; we must consider them both at once visible and invisible and present and absent, redefining what is visible or invisible, in order to open up a new perception with the understanding that one is impaired in one's own ability to perceive and realise the images. The darkness and lightness may not be two opposite sides of the binary after all. We need to find our own ways of knowing this unknown, where we no longer ignore them as the invisible other because of our fear of the unknown and the fear of admitting that there is something

40 Taken from Marianne Moore. Peggy Phelan (1993, p. 14) remarks on the way in which the past/absence/ invisible defines what is present/presence/visible. (Marianne Moore, “He ‘Digesteth Harde’ Yron” in *A Marianne Moore Reader*, New York: Viking Press, 1961, p. 24.)





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beyond our knowledge.

We need to search for the other knowledge that may enable us to see beyond the limitation of our organic eyes, beyond the reality that presents itself in our field of vision. The reality we perceive today is only structured through the retina, that in itself contains what has already disappeared, in the same way as the cinematic images. According to Paul Virilio, what we see persists only through the retina, which makes it possible for us to see the image in motion; otherwise there is no real sustaining medium in cinema.⁴¹ The retinal is merely a 'depiction' of reality, with the lights reflected on the retina as a screen; human perception or what the eyes see may only be a construction of the nerves in the cortex that construct the 'reality' we believe to exist.

THE OTHER WAY OF KNOWING: VENTURING INTO THE UNKNOWN, THE MYTH, AND THE OTHER

Through *Tropical Malady*, I believe, Apichartpong gives us a glimpse of this alternative way of venturing into the unknown, or what Sarat Maharaj terms "xeno-epistemics" (the other ways of knowing/knowning the other); he encourages us to engage with the unknown elements of the world whose existence we perhaps have not realised within the over-dominating discourse of Western knowledge that has been constructed through the binary opposition.⁴² It is through *avidya*, a Sanskrit

41 Interview with Chris Dercon, in *Interview with Paul Virilio* (ed. John Armitage), London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2001, p. 77.

42 Sarat Maharaj writes extensively in an attempt to find the other ways of thinking in the visual art scene, including in *Xeno-Epistemics: Makeshift Kit for Sounding Visual Art as Knowledge Production and the Retinal Regimes* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002).





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term that stands for "that in-between space explored by a long line from Sankara backwards to the Buddha's celebrated description by non-affirmation –'Neti, Neti, Neti'," that we can pave the way for this other way of knowing/known the other.⁴³ The 'no, neither, nor' that oscillate in *avidya* is suggested by Maharaj to "delay" polar thinking involved in "knowing/not-knowing".⁴⁴

Although there is no such term as *avidya* in Thai, there are two similar terms: *vidya* and *vicha* or *viccha*, the former deriving from Sanskrit and the latter from Pali, meaning 'knowledge.' While, according to dictionary, *vicha* literally translates as 'subject,' a term often used in formal education or the knowledge often produced in institutions, *vidya* can be translated directly as 'knowledge,' the knowledge that can be obtained from investigating, reading or researching-and may not be limited only to the learning in the classroom. If we add the prefix 'a', which signals the neutral gear in Sanskrit, *aviccha* and *avidya* mean rather something different. In most cases, the prefix 'a' in Thai is a negative form that signals the opposite side of the binary, the negative site, such as in the case of *aviccha*. *Aviccha* is a term often used in Buddhism to transcend "the state of no knowledge", the knowledge in this case meaning the right path to knowledge (the path of enlightenment) that allows one to see things as they are, while *aviccha* in this case has the negative meaning of having a wrong kind of knowledge through which one is always in darkness and cannot see things.⁴⁵ In many instances in Pali scripture, *aviccha* is compared to the dark thick shade that covers the world which

43 Sarat Maharaj, 'Unfinishable Sketch of 'An Unknown Object in 4D': scenes of art research in Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: the *Bangkok Invisible Landscapes Catalogue*, 2005, p. 13.

44 *ibid.*, p. 13.

45 Buddhadasabhikku. *The Manual of being*. Bangkok: Pannvim. 1989. p. 148.





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does not allow the light to shine through.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions where the prefix 'a' does not mean the other side of the binary but something in-between, as in *avidya*. *Avidya* can literally translate as non-knowledge, that is not a state of having no knowledge but is rather a knowledge that cannot be found by investigating, reading or researching and is something outside this system of knowledge. It is a knowledge that we need to find through another way of knowing, away from what we have been trained in before. It is a knowledge that is beyond the knowing/not knowing binary mode of thinking. It is a 'no, neither, nor', a negating mode of thinking embedded in a method of teaching in Buddhism through which we will be able to understand *avidya*. One of the great monks, Buddhahasbhikku, continually asks us to "not want to acquire, not want to be, not want to have" in order to discover the true nature of things, which is nothingness – negating all things, including oneself – that can lead to the path of enlightenment and cannot be found in only the reading of Dhamma. This form of negation, not of the binary and always in-between, is a kind of knowledge that I believe *Tropical Malady* has suggested, which opens up possibilities for us to rethink the unknown and lead us on a journey of darkness into the non-knowledge spaces, where we may be able to overcome the fear of the unknown, the other, the monster, and where once we reach the point we may find *avidya*.

It is, perhaps, not too difficult to explain and understand *Tropical Malady* through Buddhism, in the same way as it explored in the novel *The Path of Tiger*⁴⁷ by Sila Koamchan, which features a hunter who gets lost in a deep jungle and slowly takes on the role of the hunted as the tiger looks for its prey. This novel, in a way, features a similar narrative to the part in the film *Tropical Malady* where, after

46 *ibid.*, p. 152.

47 Sila Koamchan. *The Path of Tiger*. Bangkok: Minemitre. 1997.





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a long period of darkness, Keng on his final journey comes eye to eye with the tiger "he", just as the nameless "he" in the novel comes eye to eye with a nameless tiger. It is undeniable that Buddhism has become a way of life and a way of thinking that influences almost every aspect of Thai society. Nevertheless, what prevents me from entirely reducing this reading to a Buddhist perspective, as is often the case with many scholars, both Thai and Western, when referring to any Thai cultural work, is the multi-layered way in which the film is structured, enabling various ways of reading it. This can also be applied to the first part of the film, aside from its connection or disconnection to the latter part after the darkness, which features a seemingly simple love story between two men that comes as a disturbance, and which cannot be unified into one reading from a Buddhist point of view. By being consciously aware of the Buddhist reading, I hope to use this as a way of avoiding the analytical reading of everything Thai matching a Buddhist perspective, which often reduces complex works to an 'ethnic ghetto' and continuously leaves out other significant issues underlying them, in an era where the global and the local are constantly being negotiated, and in the same way as Rey Chow, who guides us through her forceful reading of non-Western works in a way that does not reduce them to 'national allegory.' She suggests:

Granting such density and complexity would mean refusing to idealise the non-West, be it in the form of a culture, a class, or a gender group; a text, an author, or a character, and instead reading the non-West in such a manner as to draw out its unconscious, irrational, and violent nuances, so that, as an "other," it can no longer simply be left in a blank, frozen, and mythologised condition known perfunctorily as an "alternative" to the West.■

48 Rev Chow. *Ethics After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.





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However, while keeping Chow's suggestion as a guideline, I would like to go back to the term *avidya* just to remind us again that one also needs to find that other, that non-knowledge beyond any framework of Western or non-Western theory. By using the negation form "no, neither, nor", derived from Buddhism, as a method of thinking instead of a means for textual analysis, one is no longer trapped in the binary mode of thinking. We only need to look for the hole, the gap, the void, the absence, as Virilio remarks in *Negative Horizon*, where he compares the field of vision to the ground in archaeological exploration. He writes that "to see is to be lying in wait for what must spring up from the ground, nameless; for what presents no interest whatsoever, what is silent will speak, what is closed is going to open, it is always the trivial that is productive, and so this constant interest in the incidental, in the margins of whatever sort, that is, in the void and absence."⁴⁹ It is only through the persistence of perception that one can see; this is a fragile state of in-between forms – anti-form, the form of transparency. I am encouraged by Virilio's reading, that only then can I hope to discover the in-between path, the middle ground in the light of the present. Through the persistence of looking into the present, *Tropical Malady* offers us an opportunity to meditate (to stop thinking and only focusing on what we are looking at), that is the only way of attaining true knowledge.

In all the films I have mentioned, the directors have chosen their own ways of representing a condition they feel deeply about. I call this condition *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, which, while resulting from the confusing, fragmented experience of the contemporary world, takes us to a new perception, a new method of thinking and new forms of creativity. It questions the grand narrative solely grounded in the Eurocentric point of view. It denaturalises the binary opposition. It is a reference to the greater

1998, p. xxi.

49 Paul Virilio. *Negative Horizon*. London: Continuum. 2005. p. 29.



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sensitivity we should bring to cultural understanding and translation.

TESTING PLATFORM

LAK-KA-PID-LAK-KA-PERD: THE NARRATIVE OF "HIDE AND SEEK" IN CONTEMPORARY BANGKOK LANDSCAPES

"*Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*" may not appear to be a positive term when used outside the context of a particular disorder of teeth and gums, or "scurvy" in medical terms (a bleeding between the teeth). It creates a rather unsettling and uneasy feeling of being unable to capture any certainty. In particular, the term "*lak*" suggests a type of action that has to be done out of public sight as it may not be legitimate or morally correct. In many ways, it may be equivalent to "sneaking" or even "stealing" in English. When the oppositional terms "close" and "open" are put together with the term "*lak*" their meanings become unsettling, as the closeness and openness are no longer straightforward acts. Literally in *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, one needs to "close" by hiding or sneaking out of public space/ into private space and to "open" by coming out of a private space/ into public space in much the same way. It is perhaps similar to the game of hide and seek, where both the seeker and the hider need to sneak in and out of public and private space in order to win. It seems that cities around the globe are ideal places for their inhabitants to participate in a kind of hide and seek game that creates such *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* urban landscapes. In many ways, the game of hide and seek has become an attempt to resist the dominant ideology. Many of the sites of resistance attempt to increase their visibility, which is a threat to the dominant ideology such that it needs to search and look through and possibly to get rid of them. But how are the roles and relationship between the hider and the seeker understood in the rapid and ever-changing scenery of the city where the boundary between the public and private is blurring? And who occupies the





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roles of the hider and the seeker in today's society?

Bangkok, in particular, is accommodating of such metaphoric games. The city is webbed with main streets and small *sois* (small streets connecting two or more main streets) each of which connects to small *trok*, or small alleys, and not to mention the waterway link of *mae-nam* (rivers), *klong* (canals), *koo* (ditches), or even small *tong rong* found in the far corners of the city.⁵⁰ Apart from this confusing network of transportation, the juxtaposition of high-rise buildings, markets, temples, billboards, slums construction sites and demolished buildings scattered around Bangkok also enable such acts to occur both horizontally and vertically. The project "*Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: The Bangkok Invisible Landscapes*", is an attempt to question the conditions and the relationship between the "seeker" and the "hider", or in other words, the "visible" and the "invisible" whose appearance may so threaten the order of society that they need to be policed and kept under the visible Bangkok.⁵¹

With the new subterranean layers of the underground train and the attempt to reorganise the entire city by the government, the project has become more urgent if we are to capture the changing narrative, which includes many players, both the hider and seeker, of contemporary Bangkok. The haunting photographic images of Bangkok by Manit Sriwanichpoom's "*Bangkok Phantasmagoria*" (2005) and the video installation by Wit Pimkanchanapong's "*BBBAANGKOOKK*" are perhaps the best

50 William S W Lim characterises Bangkok as a "loosely connected network of meaningful localities rather than a comprehensive, rational and systematically planned city". (Alternative (Post)Modernity: An Asian Perspective, Select Publishing PTE LTD: Singapore, 2003, P. 73-74.

51 The project took place between 15th of March – 15th of April at Chulalongkorn University and House Rama theatre and co-curated by Miva Yoshida.





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demonstration of such change, revealing the invisible layers of Bangkok beneath the banal everyday scenery. Sriwanichpoom has successfully captured what Brian P. McGrath terms 'simultopia', a "hybrid splicing and intertwining of suburban and urban, local and global, primitive and modern, signifying and embodied, faces and bodies."⁵² He has captured what seemed to be a 'collapsing' of both what has already gone and the newly constructed to create a sense of nostalgia and confusion in modern day Bangkok, where no one is able to comprehend fully. This is achieved through, among many others, the image of an elephant in the green grass field with a backdrop of skyscrapers that almost renders the abstract and surreal quality that is most certain to occur in the rapid transformation of Bangkok in which both levels, physically and mentally, are affected.

In a similar way, Pimkanchanapong offers an experience of seeing a simulated view of Bangkok from the sky train with a mixture of human figures and urban elements such as signs, buildings and advertising logos. He presents these views from ten different television sets but each one offers a delayed image of the previous one. The experience of watching it underlines Paul Virillio's statement that "What happens in the train window, in the car windshield, in the television screen is the same kind of cinematism. We have gone from the aesthetics of appearance, stable forms, to the aesthetics of disappearance, unstable forms."⁵³ They create what we may call a 'hyperreal' city which is no longer based on the real but is instead a fiction or artifice and where the integration of life and sign takes place such that we actually experience everyday life by going through the city, sitting in the

52 McGrath notes the meaning of 'simultopia' as follow: "while 'topia' means place, 'simul-' implies both simultaneity - occurring at the same time -and simulacrum - a copy with no original." Brian P. McGrath, "Bangkok Simultopia" in *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis*, Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders, Rebecca Zorach (eds), Routledge: London, P. 211.

53 Paul Virillio. *Pure War*. New York: Semiotext (e). 1997a. P. 85.





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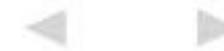
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bedroom watching television or searching the internet. Each television set has become a repeated image of the previous which, when put together, produce what may seem to be a new meaning. A new meaning such this is what Ackbar Abbas called "déjà disparu", "the feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been."⁵⁴ The city is going through changes at such speed that it is barely visible to us and we are left with only the image of the past, of the clichés or, as Guy Debord remarks, "all that once was directly lived becomes mere representation".⁵⁵ The many signs and logos we see in Pimkanchanapong's work BBBAANGKOKK attest to this. As the title of the piece suggests, the speed of such change has also unfixed our position and point of view and we are left with a blurred version of Bangkok that we may read while we are moving or vice versa; Bangkok is moving away from us. In either case, Bangkok is on the move and it is impossible to fix any position or meaning. Instead they become unstable, unclear and rather blurred.

In the same way as Pimkanchanapong's 10 television sets, Howard Chen's "Map of Bangkok" (2005) uses thousands of thousands of thumbtacks to create a spectacular display but which in itself is a dull ordinary everyday object that cannot produce any meaning. What seems to be a new image has actually been created from the repeated use of the same element. The familiar becomes the unfamiliar and vice versa when you look up close or from afar. One can see the image of a map of Bangkok yet others could see something else depending on which position you see the image

54 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, P. 25-26.

55 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (ed. Donald Nicholson-Smith), New York: Zone Books, P. 12.





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from. Besides the multiplicity of meanings, *"Map of Bangkok"* also produces a multiplicity of ways of working by exploiting the cooperation of many people throughout the process and the inclusion of their signatures in the work. Each participant brings different methods of working to the work but the final result is a harmony of thumbtacks that unexpectedly create a stunning visual piece. As well as the multiplicity ways of looking, by placing the work of the floor and allowing people to walk around it, the work can create a different point of view. Thus, you can look at the top side of the thumbtack, which reflects the light and so creates a light and shiny image, while the pin side of the thumbtack is often invisible and thus creates a rather darker side of the image. It encourages us to question our ways of seeing and to recognise the existence of the invisible/hidden elements that may be obscured under the more obvious layers of visible elements. We may discover different images, the invisible elements that we can only see from multiple points of views.

Through the rapid development of urban structures to accommodate the intensity of investment, both financially and culturally, it could be said that we give more significance than ever before to what has been considered "sideways". According to Marshall Berman, *"the distinctive sign of nineteenth-century urbanism was the boulevard, a medium for bringing explosive material and human forces together; the hallmark of twentieth-century urbanism has been the highway, a means for putting them asunder."*⁵⁶ It is probably not difficult to imagine further what Berman would have written for twenty-first century Bangkok. The hallmark has become the *soi* network, which has replaced the grandeur of the boulevards, and the elevation of sky-high highways that may not offer any alternatives and have themselves become problematic subjects. Many of the *sois* have been

56 Marshall Berman. *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. 1988. P. 165.





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re-developed concurrently with the surfacing of various sub- and side-cultures that may hitherto have been invisible, and so hidden from mainstream cultures. It is also possible to say that the relationship between the dominant ideology of the center - often in the role of the seeker - and various subcultures and sites of resistance (the marginal, the other) - often in the role of the hider - has changed significantly. Instead of the straightforward relationship in which the dominant ideology exercises its powers over the other, more often than not in today's society the hidden subject has gained more power and privilege. This is mainly because the politics and economics of globalisation have complicated the ruling structure. The dominant, the norm, the moral are no longer the only winners in today's society, but rather on many occasions they have become the loser. What will happen when the marginal becomes the dominant and vice versa?

When we say something is hidden, it is often only a matter of time before it will be revealed and opened to the public. The hidden elements, therefore, often come automatically with the revelation of other elements. For *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*, these two dimensions of hiding and revealing are often exchanged in today's complex relationships. However, the rules of 'hide and seek, which grants the status of winner to the person who can successfully hide, still remain in operation. When the seeker concedes in the game (because it is impossible to find the hider), it is time for the hider to come out and declare their freedom and victory over the seeker. Bin Laden's video, the terrorism in the most Southern part of Thailand, or even the gay and lesbian street festival can be considered to be current examples of the hider's triumph.





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However, in regards to the world situations, it is important to search for points of compromise between the dominant modes and the other, the subcultures, in order to negotiate and to co-exist. Once again the Thai term "*kalatesa*" can be used to an extent in order to facilitate negotiation. *Kalatesa*, in many ways, has become a tool used by the government and the dominant ideology to remain the authoritative agent in order to sustain the liberty and freedom of the people in the state. In the contrary, it is perhaps correct to say that the terrorists in the South do things according to *kalatesa* since the government had tried to suggest the application of zoning systems in the three southernmost provinces though failed to implement it. The government wanted to indicate the area as a "red" zone and therefore it was appropriate for terrorists to behave in the manner in which they did in the zone during the period. It is also possible to say that the sex show bars in Patpong, Thailand's infamous red-light district, are appropriate *kalatesa* and that they only exist in an area that has already been marked as a "tourist" area. The same thing also applies to the Gay festival as it only took place in Silom (where Patpong and other gay venues are situated) at a specific given time by the authority.

While it is rather difficult to physically locate and chase the hider in today's global conditions, the seeker employs surveillance technology to ensure that the domination is unchallenged. Ironically, the more the world is believed to be free and borderless the more we are under the scrutiny of the watchful eyes of authority. Thus the freedom to vote, the freedom to distribute information (whether through personal erotic VCD, internet, art exhibition or protest), the freedom to choose and buy (from 'the toothpick to the battle ship' as the Thais usually say and to more updated version of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government from 'mobile phone to international football





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club⁵⁷) and so on are just an illusion of liberty and a make-believe reality that is being created by the government. This can be seen in Surasi Kusolwong's *"The Innocence is Equal"* (2005), which imitates the borderless world in which technology makes it possible for us to be a voyeur in someone else's house.⁵⁸ This is simply to say that there is no way to hide in a technologically advanced society. The place of the hider nowadays is as stark as that of Saddam when he was discovered inside the tiny hole in the ground. The 'house' is no longer a safe place, as the strict boundary between public and private, outside and inside, and ultimately global and local is blurring. The outside can pry into the most private space while the inside is overrun by images of the outside unfolding on screen, whether television or computer. As Jean Baudrillard remarks, our private sphere has now become "a receiving and operating area, as a monitoring screen endowed with telematic power".⁵⁹ The dissolution of reality and image or representation is further enacted in the work through the transformation of a long piece of cloth into a tunnel which one nearly needs to get into inside in order to see the images contained. We have become part of a networked system where the boundary of the body, whether our body or a material body, becomes an integral part of the system. It is as if we, the voyeur, become part of the house when we put ourselves inside the cloth tunnel that is an extension of part of the "house". We are no longer certain who is the seeker or the hider in the interconnection of the perpetual communication networks. In Wang Yahui's *"Gap"*, reality is also being questioned, as it can float and fragment like a daydream. The voyeuristic act is part of the

57 Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra owns a largest mobile phone company and his attempted to cover up led him to try to bid for the Liverpool football club, which has the largest Thai fan base.

58 Riding on the success of 24-hour reality television show, "Academy Fantasia", Big Brother is now televised in Thailand with the participants that they chose from the people whom they advertised for the talentless participants whose only requirement is the courage to be on television 24 hours.

59 Jean Baudrillard. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. New York: Semiotext (e). 1988. P. 16.



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paranoid nature of being in cityscapes; we can only construct reality through what is half dream/half truth/half seen. What has been hidden may occasionally resurface.

Perhaps Bangkok's urban discourses are best summed up through the work of Bundith Phunsombatler's *"The Story of a City"* (2005), which fittingly replicated the bookshelf in the main library of Chulalongkorn University, supposedly the center of knowledge in Thai society. The juxtaposition of Sriwanichpoom's frozen photographic images creates a striking contrast with Phunsombatler's *"The Story of a City"*. The latter transforms the stillness of the bookshelf into the dynamic of a brick game. The books have become a representation of Bangkok, which narrates a story from the past to the present in which meaning is reduced to the players in a brick game. The body of knowledge has turned into a game that has often been used by the dominant or the coloniser to master or to dominate those who can neither be represented in nor possessors of the body of knowledge. On the other hand, in Phunsombatler's piece, knowledge is dynamic and constantly changing instead of being a passive and quiet representation of the notion of libraries that we are used to. Bangkok has become a narrative that can be modified time and time again through many factors and players, both visible and invisible. It is a narrative in which the relationships between the seeker and hider are dynamically reorganised ceaselessly that the knowledge produced in the society is no longer a frozen asset that occupies by any particular group of people.

The other hidden dimensions of Bangkok have also been explored through many other artists' works, such as by Tsang Tak-Ping's *"A Bangkok Diary 090305"* (2005). With the drawing of flowers on handkerchiefs placed on top of flowers picked up from the street, Tak-Ping associates the flowers





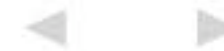
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with the memory of the invisible that is rapidly disappearing in the city. What remains are rotten flowers with no scent, in the same way as *"She cries, He cries"*, a past work featuring tears collected from people around him and displayed in the gallery. As well as in MayT Noijinda and David Futon's sound and installation piece where the mixture of different culture expresses through the sounds of Thai and Western instruments. Filmic representation also being explored to discover the invisible Bangkok as in many films screen in the project, among them are the three new commissioning films by young filmmakers: Thunskas Pansitivorakul's *"Life show"* (2005) explores the sexual performativity aspect of lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd that has often been hidden; Pattana Chirawong's *"The Airport"* (2005) expresses the strong feelings of nostalgia in the changing phase of Bangkok international airport that is not only a transit link of the space between locality and globality but also the temporal link from modernity to postmodernity; finally, Sompot Chidgasornpong's *"National Anthem"* (2005) re-discovers the lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd aspect of everyday mundane behaviour that we have never questioned, such as the act of standing still for about 3 minutes twice a day to pay respect to the Thai national anthem.

Through various channels, including an art exhibition, a film programme and competition, and seminars, the *Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: The Bangkok Invisible Landscapes* project brings together artists, filmmakers, and academics to explore and construct their own narratives of Bangkok. Each fragment has become, more or less, a piece of a jigsaw from which is constructed a new open-ended narrative of Bangkok with new players, new sets of relationships, and new layers of conflicts that are no longer represented in a chronological order. They have opened up many more dimensions and possibilities of *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* so that it is not only a kind of space or behaviour but





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rather a strategic thinking tool that opens up an alternative and positive way of thinking beyond the visible landscapes that is often bound to the binary opposition. Each one of the art pieces, films or lectures has become a test tool, a testing out of an idea. The results are far beyond what one could imagine from any one particular tool. One needs to further question the relationships between each of them and attempt to open up that in-between space to produce further possibilities of finding and constructing knowledge beyond the strict boundaries of any particular framework or the knowledge system. Each has created a different way of knowing and producing a different kind of knowledge that one needs to juxtapose and attempt to read between the lines over and over again.





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CONCLUDING REMARKS

My main intention of the thesis has been to ruminate on the contemporary conditions that have been taken place across Asia and the globe due to the urban transformation in relation to homosexuality. Through the reading and exploring of different kind of spaces from the most physical to the abstract one the conditions have been varied and constantly changing. From the space of the city where the changes have been visible as well as invisible under the multiple layers of Bangkok to the abstract spaces of filmic images in Weerasethkul's *Tropical Malady*, here I took Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' as well as Thai ideology on spaces to demonstrate the different quality of spaces that have taken place in Thailand during the last decade or so. I employ the term *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* as a way to suggest a rather specific context as well as to question the Western term that unable to fully speak or write about what have been happened elsewhere. Through different methods of researching whether mapping, interviewing, filmmaking, photographing as well as inter-textual and textual analysis through historical, cultural and social backgrounds have been employed to understand this condition that may or may not be fully visible enough but we are already taken part in it. I am also aided by wide ranging of theoretical works by both Western and Thai academics in reading different kind of spaces.

The following frameworks help structure the written chapters and other means of exploration and critical examination throughout. First, the overall power of Western postcolonialism as well as postmodern discourses on the issue of sexuality that have played an important part in shaping the position from which Thai homosexuals are viewed as well as how they view themselves. Second is the globalisation process of late-capitalism; and, third is Thai's own cultural and historical specificity





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in constituting homosexual identity as well as the Thai construction of knowledge.

City: Re-boundary Bangkok aims to concentrate on the study of Bangkok urban landscapes in relation to homosexuality. I have been researched through historical and theoretical background, mapping, filmmaking as well as testing sites of *Alternative Love Film Festival* and *Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: The Bangkok Invisible Landscapes*. I have demonstrated a move from the way in which homosexuality was understood in the 1980s: that it must be kept and contained in their own private space through filmic representation – *I am a Man* – to the one in which Thai lesbians and gays men begin to problematise the silences surrounding homosexuality by resisting established norms in the 1990s, through to the reaction to the Rajabhat's ban, and the *Alternative Love Film Festival*, as well as the documentary I made in 1998, *Blue Journey*, which provides an insight into the life of homosexuals and how they construct their identity through space and *Lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd: The Bangkok Invisible Landscapes* exhibition attempted to represent such new urban condition of the in-between spaces. It has also extended and critical to my thinking towards *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd* that results in the process of rethinking about its relationship and rewrite some of the research that has been done.

I have been assisted by the works of several urban geographers who offer insights into the relationship between urban landscapes and sexuality, such as Michael P. Brown whose work offers the possibility of locating a kind of closet in urban landscapes where the body and capitalism are intertwined, and Chauncey whose work emphasises the process rather than the physical dimension of the controversial term 'queer space'. However, as I have argued throughout, the binary opposition of spaces that



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underlies the construction of homosexual identity, as suggested by the use of the term closet, depends on the knowing/not knowing, light/dark, public/private which can bear different meanings in Thai society and lead to a different model of homosexual identity being constructed in Thai society. Through the Thai ideology of space and *kalatesa*, the space is less physically fixed rather than focusing on the body's appearance and behaviour to change the space. Through *kalatesa*, the Thai social code of conduct is already predetermined by time and space. The right gender behaviours also have to be performed despite their sexuality. Gender and appearance are very much transferable and unfixed.

Re-reading The body focuses on the discourses of the body. By establishing the body as a site where power can be embodied and reflects social determination, I re-reading the *katoey's* or transvestite's body in the once ignored and missing part of history that generally relies on an over-dominated discourse of heterosexual ideologies. My main argument in this chapter is that the biological body that, has long been used as a significant mechanism for heterosexual ideology to impose the idea of the compulsory binary opposition of sex/gender and construct our knowledge of sex/gender, has become increasingly unsettled with regards to certain events such as the appearance of Parinya, a *katoey* boxer, in Thai boxing in which the body, then, has been used as a means for minoritarian subject to use it to re-counter hegemony ideology from within. Foucault's heterotopia has provided an alternative way to consider *katoey* body in the way in which it embodies the ideology of the unity of sexes as well as it has become a kind of site of resistance in the society. Through some of the visual works I have done such as *Kinnaree* and *Home Movie* have further explore the process of how the body of homosexuals may have redefined the traditional spaces such as boxing ring and home.





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Re-Framing Filmic Representation concerns a group of filmic representations in Asia that feature the kind of in-between spaces such as *Vive l'amour* (Tsai Ming Liang, 1994) and *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar Wai, 2002), and *Tropical Malady* (2004) that have been suggested and represented through filmic images and may not realise through the rush of everyday life.⁶⁰ This chapter discusses the deployment of cinematic and other visual codes in order to understand the construction of the relationship between the 'other' and the norms, and the way in which these mechanism may be used to create a kind of subvert or counter-dominant ideology; how these representations could function as both a counter-dominant ideology and at the same time as a mechanism for the dominant ideology to renegotiate the subject of the 'other'. I am concentrate on three kind of spaces relating to filmic. First is the space in film which one can find and locate in everyday life. Second is the film in space which discusses the relationship between film itself and the other spaces. The third is film as space which is the most abstract one, a kind of real-imagined where the desires could be seen and take place.

By juxtaposing various means and forms, i.e. arts project, seminar, research, film, and photography, this PhD these have provide a platform for expressing, testing and reflecting of ideas that results in multiple of meanings of spaces such as the physical space of 'park' and space below bridges to the space katoey. This testing site is not fixed where one ideology takes over another, but is instead a

60 What I refer to as Asian cinema here is only a mere representation of a group of films that have been made in several locations particularly those in a period of immense urban transformation and portray these changes in similar manner through filmic images. These are not the representation of Asian Cinema as a whole. Although by using the term it may run the risk of alienating the subject to ethnographic or 'third world' cinema study as view by some Eurocentric Western audience as they may provoke a particular kind of reading that often associate with the term 'third world' cinema or at worst restricted them within what Rev Chow calls 'ethnic ghetto' (Chow. 1999. P. 48)



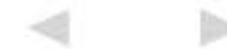


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rather fluid one where any meaning become unsettled and constantly shifting, in a constant process of negotiation, a site that is considered to be *lak-ka-pid-lak-ka-perd*. It is rather like sometimes close-sometimes open process that loop back and forth to allow one's freedom to interpret, to analyse, to be creative, to create a process of thinking, to escape from any easy routes and to avoid the known path. A new paradigm of creativity is being created beyond the old framework, the grand narrative that used to govern the creativity forces. It is a condition that needs to be addressed and explored further in which it may provide an alternative form of thinking altogether.





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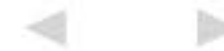
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