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CONTRIBUTORS



Max Crosbie-Jones is a Bangkok-based writer. He profiled some of Thailand's leading auteurs for our feature on the country's film scene (page 76). "The Thai art film scene is finding more acceptance, more allies and more domestic visibility. The distinctiveness of Thai filmmaking in late 2018 – and the enthusiasm surrounding it – is palpable. You just need to know where to find it."



We sent Melbourne-based photographer Lauren Bamford to Brisbane to spotlight the region's thriving urban beekeeping scene (page 56). "I shot the stingless native bees with Tim Heard [of Sugarbag Bees]. Due to their stingless nature, I wore no protective veil – and had tiny bees crawling into my eyes and mouth as a result. I wrapped that shoot pretty quick!"



Journalist Richard Orange, who's currently based in Sweden, profiled some of the country's extreme long-distance ice skaters (page 66). "I found out that it's possible to skate on ice that's much, much thinner than I imagined. I also enjoyed hearing Henrik Trygg's tales of near disaster on the ice and understanding how serious a situation you could get into."

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IMAGE: GRAHAM MEYER

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A new wave of Thai filmmakers is bringing the country — and its diverse cinema scene — into sharper focus

THE NEXT REEL

Over a decade after
Thailand's "slow"
art cinema made
international
waves, a bold new
generation of
distinctive, socially
conscious Thai
filmmakers is
emerging and
bringing the country
— and its diverse
film scene — into
sharper focus

*Words by Max Crosbie-Jones
Portraits by Graham Meyer*







IMAGE: DAVID TERRAZAS (BANGKOK)



How will Thailand look 10 years from now? If director Chulayarnnon Siriphol's latest short film, *Planetarium*, is to be believed, the answer is: downright fantastical. Instead of the frenetic streets, labyrinthine malls and consumerist gloss of present-day Bangkok, or the postcard-perfect scenery of the plains, beaches and mountains that unfurl in every direction beyond, viewers are treated to the sight of futuristic boy scouts, hot-pink military uniforms and people being fired out into the stratosphere. It all scrambles the mind somewhat, and leaves you wondering: What exactly does this wacky, free-associative piece hope to achieve?

"I believe in creating public dialogue," explains the fresh-faced 32-year-old, speaking in a quiet corner of Bangkok CityCity – a striking white-cube art gallery that sits incongruously amid the upmarket condos and leafy embassies of the Thai capital's affluent Sathorn area, and occupies a prominent position in the vanguard of its experimental video art scene. "My films are questions." Born in 1986, this soft-spoken child of the VHS era has a back catalogue ranging from cryptic short films about Buddhist monks in motorcycle helmets to a satirical reworking of a classic Thai novel. And now, after over a decade of participating in global film festivals, his profile is rising. Back in May, *Ten Years Thailand*, an

omnibus film compiling contributions from four Thai directors – including Chulayarnnon's *Planetarium* – was screened at the Cannes Film Festival. Suddenly, Chulayarnnon's work was being watched alongside efforts by three of Thailand's best-known arthouse directors: Wisit Sasanatieng, Aditya Assarat and the Cannes-conquering Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

"These guys were my idols when I was younger," he says. "I was nervous when I was asked to take part. I questioned whether I'd be able to join them." Set to be released in Thailand soon, this film is a spin-off of a Hong Kong hit – one that asked each filmmaker to imagine their homeland in a decade. "My part is about the relationship between education, media and cosmology," he explains. "I tried to mix these elements together to reflect on the situation in Thailand."

Chulayarnnon is not the first avant-garde Thai filmmaker to explore socio-political issues via carefully constructed allegory, or to have his work grace a prestigious film festival. However, he is one of a raft of emerging local filmmakers who are finding success – be it critical or commercial, domestic or international – and audiences on their own terms, without playing by the traditional industry rulebook. As he puts it: "It's much better than 10 or 15 years ago... people are producing all kinds of moving image." »



Previous spread
Video artist Kawita Vatanajyankur

This spread, from left
Filmmaker Chulayarnnon Siriphol; Bangkok's vast, light-soaked city skyline



This spread, clockwise from top left
 Anocha Suwichakornpong; the Scala cinema; aspiring auteur Wattanapume Laisuwanchai

This, simply speaking, is profoundly different to what came before. During the golden era of Thai cinema which spanned roughly from the 1950s to the 1970s, a pantheon of beehived leading ladies and quiffed alpha males starred in formulaic 16mm movies; hand-painted movie hoardings loomed large in Thai towns and cities; and independent cinemas hummed with crowds. But while the local films produced were super-saturated, fun and often profitable, few registered as more than mass entertainment.

That began to change in the late 1970s, when socially conscious filmmakers such as Vichit Kounavudhi and Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol began tackling hard-hitting issues. However, Thai film only really hit its international stride in the late 1990s, when indie directors Wisit, Nonzee Nimibutr and Pen-Ek Ratanaruang reaped success abroad with a string of cutting-edge, yet touching, dissections of popular culture. Since then, though, Thailand's once illustrious independent movie-house network has been unceremoniously dismantled and the advent of mall multiplexes pushed homegrown films to the margins. Despite this, the country's filmmaking stature has grown, albeit fitfully.

Leading the independent director pack for over 15 years now has been Apichatpong. Film critics and arthouse aficionados swoon over the Palme d'Or winner's unique brand of "slow" cinema, which fuses the tropes of European Neorealism and experimental video art with the homespun spiritualism and modern tics of pastoral Thailand. But almost as inspirational among his peers is his approach: his gestures against censorship; his harnessing of international funding and support; and his focus on the margins of Thai society, history and belief. Meanwhile, dominating the nation's mainstream industry is GDH 559,

the famous Bangkok film studio behind last year's regional box office smash *Bad Genius*, a propulsive heist caper by director Nattawut Poonpiriya that possesses all the slick flourishes and kinetic pace of a Danny Boyle flick.

For years, established and emerging Thai filmmakers have operated in the creative bandwidth between these two polarised extremes, and yet, on the ground in late 2018, quality Thai filmmaking feels more diverse, accessible and accepted than in the recent past. August alone saw the wide domestic release of ultra-hip auteur Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit's *BNK48: Girls Don't Cry*, an unorthodox documentary about a manufactured girl group, and *Someone from Nowhere*, a surreal psychodrama by author-screenwriter-director extraordinaire Prabda Yoon. The third edition of the Bangkok Underground Film Festival was held in September, while the debut edition of Ghost:2561, a new artist-curated video art and performance festival, landed in October. And at this very moment, site-specific video art is featuring prominently in Thailand's two concurrent contemporary art festivals – the Bangkok Art Biennale and the Thailand Biennale.

"The whole Thai film scene has become a lot more sophisticated," explains Philip Cornwel-Smith, the author of *Very Thai*, a best-selling book on Thai popular culture. "Now we are seeing more diverse subject matter, higher-quality aesthetics and design and more innovative



IMAGES: JASON LANG



BEYOND THE MULTIPLEX

Indie cinemas in Bangkok where you can catch your next made-in-Thailand film

Cinema Oasis

Filmmaker Ing K and photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom built this 49-seat auditorium to “promote, support and honour neglected or oppressed films, filmmakers and artists”. cinemaasis.com

The Scala

Enjoy a homegrown horror flick in the finest surviving relic from Bangkok’s movie-house heyday – and do it fast: a big question mark surrounds the renewal of the Scala’s lease in 2020. apexsiam-square.com

Bangkok Screening Room

This spot offers a mix of Thai films and foreign classics, plus talks by local filmmakers. There’s a 52-seat screening room with a 4K projector and surround sound, along with a well-stocked bar. bkksr.com

approaches.” A film-literate niche audience has also emerged, he adds. Driving this surge in activity is the democratising power of digital technology and social media, not to mention the documentary clubs, screening rooms, film festivals and video-art-friendly galleries that have recently sprung up in Bangkok. “Access to and acceptance of serious filmmaking has never been better in Thailand,” he concludes.

Agreeing with this sentiment is Chomwan Weeraworawit, one of the co-organisers of the Ghost:2561 festival. A fast-talking advocate for independent Thai film, she stresses that the scene is “older than we all realise” but senses heightened levels of interest and respect from all directions. “I don’t think we’re peripheral anymore,” she says. “As a filmmaking nation, we’re no longer a satellite – we’re a world.”

Operating at the white-hot end of that world is Nawapol, a social-media-savvy filmmaker who makes bridging the mainstream and independent film worlds look deceptively easy. His growing body of slyly humorous, youth-oriented works includes the hit studio film *Freelance*, about an overworked freelance graphic designer who bonds with his dermatologist, and the low-budget indie film *Die Tomorrow*, a documentary-meets-fiction mashup that successfully broaches a dull subject among the carefree young: death. A crowd-pleasing exhibition at Bangkok CityCity Gallery and some award-winning short films for various brands have only further sealed the adoration of his millennial fanbase. “For me, the film scene is freer than when I started out,” he says when asked about the changes he has witnessed. “I love making theatrical films but am also happy working in other formats. It’s all filmmaking, right?”

In pursuit of their own stamp of authorship, some artists are also cutting the moving image down to haiku-like proportions. Acclaimed video artist Kawita Vatanajyankur – a participant in the current Bangkok Art Biennale – creates non-narrative vignettes that resemble colourful studio-based adverts but which, on close inspection, clearly function as biting critiques of women’s domestic roles or the degrading pitfalls of capitalism. For her, the moving image allows her to wordlessly express how “people are being turned into something that’s not human”.

Others are aspiring auteurs who produce highly personal youth or adult dramas, or documentary makers who believe certain stories are not being told – but need to be. Pursuing the latter path is filmmaker Wattanapume Laisuwanchai, who’s picked up awards and »



Above
Chulayarnnon
Siriphol
backdropped by
a projection of one
of his films

acclaim for *Phantom of Illumination*, a poetic documentary about the closure of one of Bangkok's last independent cinemas, and is now hard at work on a new project.

But despite the anything-goes atmosphere and creative crossovers, things are far from perfect. "The industry has matured in many ways – I see more films, more enthusiasm and more opportunities – but we lack consistency," says Kong Rithee, the long-serving film critic for the *Bangkok Post*. "The ascension of our industry is obvious, but it's not steady."

While Thailand has good producers and technicians, Nawapol thinks a lack of decent scriptwriters is part of the reason for this. "We need to start at the beginning – to train young filmmakers in different ways of seeing and writing," he says. Similarly, Anocha Suwichakornpong – the director, producer and screenwriter behind 2016's *By the Time It Gets Dark*, a lyrical film that broached a taboo national trauma but won many domestic awards – sees a skill shortage in front of the camera. "A lot of our actors... only get to work on TV or in commercials," she says, "so they don't get to do challenging or realistic roles."

Keen to see more help for filmmakers, Anocha – whose video collaboration with British experimental filmmaker Ben Rivers appears in the Thailand Biennale, which begins this month – supports the controversial idea of more direct or indirect state funding and the introduction of a South Korea-style screen quota system that would ensure a minimum number of domestic screenings for Thai films. Looking to the future, she hopes to see more women, more film critics and more diversity in terms of ethnicity and race. "We don't have to be so Thai," she says. She'd also like to see more bums on seats – a figurative sore spot in a country where plenty of films get made but many still aren't widely promoted or seen. "Everyone having a big enough audience so that making a film actually means something; that's the Thailand I'd really like to see in 10 years."

Among the small but growing network of alternative cinemas trying to make this a reality is the Bangkok Screening Room, an upscale 52-seat venue that actively seeks out new Thai films. In the softly lit confines of its stylish foyer-bar and small yet state-of-the-art auditorium, gourmet drinks and snacks are served before each screening and independent Thai movies alternate with global arthouse hits and classics. Since it opened in 2016, only a few hundred metres from Bangkok CityCity, Australian co-founder Nicholas Hudson-Ellis has been struck by the volume of quality local films getting made – and the dovetailing desire, keenly felt among its discerning clientele, for alternatives to the blockbuster-fixated multiplexes.

"There is an appetite here for something that's in between watching video art on a crate in a gallery," he explains, "and spending a small fortune to have a blanket brought to you in a shopping mall." Enjoying a flick here, in the plush comfort of this intimate movie house, the new dichotomy at the heart of the country's quietly blossoming film scene becomes clear: while it may remain a struggle to make a Thai film, it's getting much easier to enjoy one. ■

SCENE SHIFTERS

Other Thai filmmakers making their mark, both locally and internationally

Nontawat Numbenchapol

At only 35, and having previously tackled border disputes, contaminated rivers and teenage romance, he's already Thailand's most fearless documentary maker.

Anucha Boonyawatana

Her latest feature, *Malila: The Farewell Flower*, is a tender rumination on Buddhist belief. This film furthers the art of slow cinema with a gentle love story and sumptuous soft-focus imagery.

Pathompon Tesprateep

His experimental short films are shot on degraded 8mm or 16mm film stock and have caught the attention of local film scene figurehead Apichatpong Weerasethakul.



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