

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS OF THAI AND HOLLYWOOD MOVIES

Cinema as a form of mass media, can send any message about the 'world' in such a way that people from that particular 'world' are familiar with. This has been done with several forms of performance (Nithi Aiewswiwong, 1995: 78-79). Thai cinema as well as traditional performances such as *Likay*, *Lakhorn*, or *Khon*, all send traditional messages such as in-law conflict, jealousy in polygamy family structure, etc. to the audience. To make a Thai film, one must do it on the basis of what Thai people are familiar with. In other words, the message has to be comprehensible and easily recognized by the audience. Thus, many elements implemented from traditional performances have been included into Thai films in order to gain the acceptance of Thai audiences. This chapter examines the characteristics of Thai cinema in comparison with Hollywood movies with emphasis on plot, characterization, and relevant stylistic convention.

Characteristics of Thai Cinema: ‘Nam Nao’

Classical Thai cinema is widely known as ‘Nang Nam Nao’ (literally, films that stink). This is identified by the repetition of storylines which is very much like that of traditional performances (Ibid., 1995). As M.R Kukrit Pramoj (1971: 463-493) comments, “Thai films, in comparison to a language, are very repetitious and unclear. They present to us the same set of stars and comedians. Most of the scenes are shot in elegant houses. The dialogue is used excessively, causing annoyance and boredom.” Nonetheless, to examine the characteristics of Thai cinema carefully, the following topics will be discussed: plot and characterization.

Plot

Generally, Thai films uphold the belief in Karma, “whereby every good or bad deed brings about an appropriate consequence either in the present or in some future life” (Toews and McGreger 1998: 165). One will eventually be rewarded or punished for whatever one does. As mentioned in Chapter II, Thai films have taken their storylines from both traditional performances and novels. Best-selling novels which can be romantic, idealistic or tragic are commonly adapted into films. These novels act as a means of escapism, taking their readers away from reality and bringing them pleasure and joy as the story unfolds with a happy ending of the hero and heroine. The stories are moving which means that they are likely to stimulate sympathy, hatred, love, excitement, etc. M.L. Boonlue Tapayasuwan (1975: 15) suggests that

“the writing of Thai literary works puts emphasis on the merriment of the story. No questions are posed to force the readers to think over. The pleasure of the readers is to find out the solution toward the end. It seems that Thai writers have also included traditional performances into their works as they all share the same structure and contain the same story lines, except that novels are more contemporary.”

By taking novels and traditional performance as their precedents, Thai films are the mixtures of everything from tragedy and romance to comedy. As Sirichai Sirikaya (1988: 30) notes, the closest genre that is similar to Thai films is Melodrama⁸.

Characterization

The characters in Thai film as well as in novels and traditional performances (*Lakorn*, *Likay*, and *Khon*) are stock characters. That is, there are four dominant characters with distinct personality, namely, the hero, the heroine, the villain and the comedian.

The hero has to be handsome, brave, benevolent, strong, intelligent, etc. He is devoid of any personality that implies indecency. His role is to fight against evil, i.e. a symbolic virtue fighting against vice.

⁸ The genre was very popular in the West from the end C.19 toward the beginning of C. 20. It is full of exciting events and exaggerated characters.

The heroine has to be beautiful, decent and helpless. She is always taken advantage of by the villains. She has to confront many difficulties in her life. At the end, she will be met by the hero and live happily ever after with him as a result of her good deeds.

Note that the heroes and the heroines in Thai films have always been good-looking. This is meant to imply the spiritual truth of those characters. Their physical appearances reflect their spiritual condition. Therefore, the audience can distinguish the good from the bad characters by their looks.

The villain, the most disgusting character in a film, is full of hatred and vengeance. He can do anything to achieve his goal, i.e. getting rid of the hero or heroine. Finally, as the villain is acting against good people, he deserves a tragic ending.

The comedian is an unimportant but very significant character in all traditional plays. This character later appears in films too. He is the only character with no fixed role, as his role does not advance the plot. Since no script is provided for the comedian, he is obliged to improvise his own dialogue. He is therefore the wittiest character. He also functions as a distracter who eliminates reality on the stage or the screen and reminds the audience of the reality that is not there during the performance (Nithi Aiewswiwong 2538: 86). His role is to 'converse' with the audience. Though he is not an important

character, as his role does not affect the main storyline, he can freely criticize the action of the hero or heroine and add a sense of humor to the film. There are scenes in which the comedian would come out and criticize the event in the play or film. In so doing, he fulfills the gap between the audience and the actor/actress on the screen as he relates the story to everyday life which the audience are familiar with. As a result, the audience are indirectly involved in the story and enjoy the film at the same time. The scenes in which the comedian appear are called ‘comic relief scenes’, i.e. scenes that help the audience relax after a lengthy tension. Usually, the comedians would physically follow the hero and the heroine wherever they go. Henceforth, they are called ‘*Talok Tam Phra Tam Nang*’ (*Comedians who follow the hero and the heroine*) (Sirichai Sirikaya, 1988: 25.) Note that since Thai films do not belong to any specific genre, the comedian has his role in all Thai films.

To better understand the characteristics of Thai cinema it is helpful to look at Brandon’s (1967)⁹ discussion on the characteristic of performance in South East Asian region¹⁰ in the following section:

Firstly, the story consists of many episodes which makes it rather lengthy. This structure is called ‘episodic’. However, the performance in SEA region cannot be compared with any genre of the Western drama since it does not belong specifically to tragedy, comedy, farce or romance. Generally, a story is

⁹ A scholar who analyzed the characteristics of performance in South East Asian Region.

¹⁰ Since countries in South East Asia have assimilated other countries’ cultures within the region, the characteristics of Thai films can be explained through this analysis (Sirichai Sirikaya: 2531).

a combination of all modes such as joy, sorrow, excitement, violence, horror, etc. The audience can laugh, cry or get excited when they go to a play or see a film. Moreover, morality is implicated in characterization. The hero is a symbol of the virtue whereas the villain is a symbol of the vice. In the end, the virtue can conquer the vice which leads to a happy ending. Apart from morality, other oriental values are inherent in the story; for example, a husband can have many wives. This leads to the conflict between the major wife and the minor wife or wives. In addition, the repetition of plot is found in the narrative of this region. The hero has to face a difficult life at the beginning. After gaining more knowledge, he can defeat the villain. This kind of plot is frequently used in many stories. Lastly, characters are flat. They have only one-sided personality. For instance, a hero has to be benevolent; he cannot be selfish or mean. It can therefore be said that Thai performance and other countries in SEA region have no clearly defined genre.

Characteristics of Hollywood Movie: ‘The mainstream’¹¹

When referring to the mainstream movie, one would think of the movie that is familiar to audience all over the world. The mainstream cinema is usually characterized by its big budget, quality production and well-known stars. It seems that the only well-known source of ‘mainstream’ movie is Hollywood, the center of glamour and illusion. The box-office receipts confirm the popularity of Hollywood movies all over the world. In addition, in the study of the film, most scholars refer to Hollywood movies as the prototype of all

¹¹ Extracted from Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, 1985; Bordwell, and Thompson, 1979; 1997; Dick, 1998; *Study of Film as Internet Application* [Online]: 2000, March 1.

motion pictures. Being the mainstream movie and having been observed as a role model, therefore, the characteristics of Hollywood cinema ought to be examined in this part.

“Cinema has confirmed that narrative is more than a set of texts or even a certain kind of text. It is first of all an innate capability, like language itself, which surfaces in many areas of human life and is dominant in some of these. Narrative competence holds our signification in place to give them an order and a thrust. We sense its power in our daily conversations and in nearly every form of communication...it is celebrated in literature and, as we have seen, it is nearly synonymous with the word “cinema”.” (Andrew, 1984: 76)

According to the statement above, when we go to the movies¹², we almost always mean that we go to see the narrative film, i.e. a film that tells a story (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997: 89). In filmic terms, the narrative is a chain of events in cause-effect relationship that occur in time and space. “We make sense of a narrative by identifying its events and linking them by cause and effect, time, and space” (Ibid.: 90). Normally, a narrative’s use of causality, time and space involves a change from an initial situation to a final situation, meaning there must be an opening, a closing and a pattern of development.

¹² Note that the sources used within this part, when referring to cinema, movie, and film, all imply American or Hollywood’s motion pictures.

Moreover, in order to get a narrative movie, there must be characters who have strong desires in something.

Genres are the most influential factor which control the production of a movie since they are considered as “a ready made narrative form” (Gianneth, 1990: 322.) As mentioned in Chapter I, film genres distinguish one film from another as they determine content, plot, themes, characterization, etc. of the particular film. To understand Hollywood movies, it is necessary to understand film genres. In this part, Hollywood genres will be discussed in terms of content, style, and characterization. According to the scope of the study, the emphasis is placed on **action, thriller, and horror genres.**

Genres

Genres are various types of films which can be recognized by “a characteristic set of conventions in style, subject matter, and values” (Giannetti, 1990: 322). Some are defined by the distinctiveness of emotional effect they aim for (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997: 52). By isolating the various elements in a film and categorizing them in genres, it is possible to easily evaluate a film within its genre. However, all films have at least one major genre, although there are a number of films that are considered crossbreeds or hybrids with three or four overlapping genre types that identify them. It can be said that no genre can be defined in a single hard-and-fast way. The main genres are the **western, crime (gangster), horror, musical, science fiction, and comedy**

(Study of Film as Internet Application, [Online]: 2000, March 1.) Since “we expect certain characteristics from certain genres: a revenge motive in a western; an investigation in a mystery film; a song-and-dance situation in a musical” (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997: 54), by knowing the conventions of genres, the viewer has a pathway into a film.

Since Hollywood films are produced by genres, it is necessary to examine some of the main genres in order to have an overall idea of the characteristics of Hollywood movies.

Sci-fi films or **science fiction films** often portray technological potential to destroy mankind and express society's anxiety about technology and how to forecast and control the impact of technological change on society. There are often encounters with other aliens or beings (sometimes from our deep subconsciousness, sometimes in space or other dimensions), usually malevolent, that fight an eternal struggle or battle (good vs. evil). In terms of characterization, heroes or heroines are usually human beings who have to fight against villains who can be aliens from outer space or humanlike-beings resulting from technology. The heroes/ines' ultimate goal is to save the world by eliminating the villains. **Crime and gangster films** often highlight or glorify the rise and fall of a particular criminal(s), gang, bank robber, murderer or lawbreaker in personal power struggles or conflict with law and order figures, an underling or competitive colleague, or a rival gang. Rivalry with

other criminals in gangster warfare is often a significant plot. The characters in this genre cycle in the realm of police, gangsters, criminals, etc. These characters can be either heroes or villains, depending on the intention of the filmmaker himself. **Western films** are the oldest, most enduring and flexible genre, and one of the most characteristically American genres in their mythic origins: they focus on the West - in North America. Usually, the central plot of the western film is the classic, simple goal of maintaining law and order on the frontier in a fast-paced action story. It is normally rooted in conflict - good vs. bad, man vs. man, new arrivals vs. Native Americans (inhumanely portrayed as savage Indians), cowboys vs. Indians, man vs. nature, civilization vs. wilderness, schoolteachers vs. saloon dancehall girls, villain vs. hero, lawman vs. gunslinger, East vs. West, and farmer vs. industrialist, to name only a few. Often the hero of a western film meets his opposite "double," a mirror of his own evil side that he has to destroy. He is often a local law enforcement officer, territorial marshal or skilled, fast-draw gunfighter: a person of integrity and principle - courageous, moral, tough, solid and self-sufficient character (often with trusty sidekicks), possessing an independent and honorable attitude. The western hero can usually stand alone and face danger on his own.

Cited above are some examples of the main genres. The remaining genres are **action-thriller** and **horror** which are the focus of this study. Each will be treated individually in the following section. However, since **action-**

thriller is a combination of two genres, it is necessary to discuss them separately.

Action Films

Action genre¹³ tends to focus on all-male activities including sex and violence (Julius, 1996: 1). It has tremendous impact and continuous high energy which often relies on rapid cutting and slow-motion violence (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997: 53.) The story is generally about

vengeful cops, and car chases, lunatic villains and material arts monsters, male-bonding, gun fights and super secret agents, swords and sorcerers, wartime Nazi-bashing, boys' own adventures, casual destruction and general death-defiance... (Julius, 1996: 1)

It seems that the genre creates nothing but violence. However, **action films** are not meant to corrupt, but to entertain. They don't exist to prompt weak-minded individuals into random acts of madness. Those elements are "all designed for pure audience escapism with the action sequences at the core of the film" (Dirk, [Online]: 2000, March 1.) Always, the plot is about a hero(ine) struggling against extreme odds or an evil villain, and attaining victory or resolution at the end of the story. For example, John Woo's intense and intelligent **action film**, *Face/Off* (1997), featuring a stolen-identity plot with

¹³ Action is not regarded as a genre proper. Rather, it is a label given by the industry to films with masculine narrative in general.

Nicholas Cage and John Travolta in the good-evil roles. Another good example is the well-equipped hero from *James Bond '007'* who is always involved with gorgeous women and nifty gadgets.

Suspense and Thriller Films

Suspense and thriller films are to “promote intense excitement, suspense, a high level of anticipation, ultra-heightened expectation, uncertainty, anxiety, and nerve-wrecking tension” (Ibid.) However, a genuine thriller is a film that restlessly pursues a single-minded goal, i.e. thrills built towards a climax. Usually, the main character(s) confronts unsuspecting or unknowing danger in which escape seems impossible. The suspense and danger generated in thrillers are more focused than that created by the gangster, crime, or detective film. The themes often “include terrorism, political conspiracy, pursuit, or romantic triangles leading to murder” (Ibid.)

The acknowledged master of the **suspense-thriller genre** is Alfred Hitchcock. In his films, frequently, “the main character(s) committed a crime or was caught as a victim or a circumstance, from which there stemmed the inevitable life-and-death chase concluding with a showdown at a familiar landmark”(Ibid.). One of his notably shocking and engrossing thrillers was *Psycho* (1960). Nonetheless, there are many recent thrillers that do not follow Hitchcock’s prototype such as *True Lies* (1994) and *Mission Impossible* (1995).

Horror Films

Horror films are most recognizable by their intention to provoke emotional effect on the audience. This genre aims to shock, disgust, and repel: in short, to horrify.

They deal with our most primal nature and its fears: our nightmares, our vulnerability, our alienation, our terror of the unknown, our fear of death, loss of identity, or fear of sexuality. (Ibid.)

Settings of the **horror genre** take place in

... spooky old mansions or fog-shrouded, dark locales, with 'unknown,' human, supernatural or grotesque creatures, ranging from vampires, madmen, devils, unfriendly ghosts, monsters, mad scientists, 'Frankenstein,' demons, zombies, evil spirits, arch fiends, satanic villains, the 'possessed,' werewolves and freaks to even the unseen, diabolical presence of evil. (Ibid.)

The genre differs from **thriller and suspense** in several aspects. For instance, **thriller and suspense films** are rather mysterious and complicated, which arouses the audience to find out what will happen next. Since '**thriller**' is combined with '**suspense**', the audience can sense dreadfulness of the film, making the suspicious situation even more thrilling. However, it usually ends

with a resolution. The **horror genre**, on the other hand, focuses on creepy atmosphere and puts emphasis on slashing and bloody killing. Nonetheless, both **horror** and **suspense-thriller films** share the same structure. According to Kittisak Suwannaphokin (cited by Krissada Kerdee, 1998: 33), well-known film critic and historian, the four components that both genres share in common are *Moment of Suspense*, *Helpless Character*, *Trapped Situation*, and *Psychic Element*.

Moment of Suspense is a situation or an act in the film that creates excitement, fright or extreme surprise in the audience, depending on the audience's mental state and the ability of the director. It usually occurs when a character is victimized and attacked by the killer in one way or another.

Helpless Character is embedded in the characterization. This means that the particular character is vulnerable and seems to be unable to help himself (or herself) out of an endangered situation. These characters are usually children, women, old people or crippled people. The audience are forced to be on her side and pray that someone comes to her rescue although there is no immediate danger.

Trapped Situation occurs when a character is cornered which might take a short period of time or engage the entire film. Frequently, the character lives on his own, and is cut off from society (at least for a moment). The situation

puts the character into a *helpless* position which creates a *moment of suspense*, thereby thrilling the audience tremendously.

Lastly, *Psychic Element* is the reason behind the conscience of the character which leads to a specific behavior. Most of the killers in **horror films**, if they are human beings, are likely to be psychopaths.

The ending of **horror films** can be categorized into two traditions: a time-honored tradition in which the monster is destroyed only when the series or the cycle dies; and the premise of undying monster in which the monster seems to come back in the next part (Dick, 1998: 123). Folktales with devil characters, witchcraft, fables, myths, ghost stories, etc. are the sources for this kind of films.

The early **horror films** were mostly taken from literature with horror figures such as Frankenstein, Dracula, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A few **horror films** in the mid 1990s successfully return to slasher themes, providing an attractive and hip young cast: *The Craft* (1996) is about schoolgirls being obsessed with witchcraft and black magic, Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* (1998) feature teens covering up a fatal hit-and-run accident with expected horrific results.

To conclude, the main characteristics of Hollywood or the ‘mainstream’ movies focus on genres which are ready-made narrative forms that can be easily identified by filmmakers and viewers alike. Such characteristics make Hollywood movies more versatile than Thai films because all Hollywood films tend to follow the convention of one or more genres.

Having discussed the characteristics of Thai cinema alongside that of Hollywood, it can be concluded that both have developed their own ‘distinct’ tradition. Thai cinema, being commonly recognized as ‘nam nao’, includes all moods into a film and presents repetitious plot and stock characters. Hollywood movies, on the other hand, are determined by genres, resulting in a variety of narrative forms.

As mentioned in Chapter II, Contemporary Period sees Thai cinema as reaching a new stage of assimilating western elements with the ‘nam nao’ formula. In order to prove this hypothetical statement, two contemporary Thai films belonging to action-thriller and horror genres will be analyzed in depth in the next chapter in order to detect such assimilation.